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June 2001

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Global warming: ignorance is not bliss

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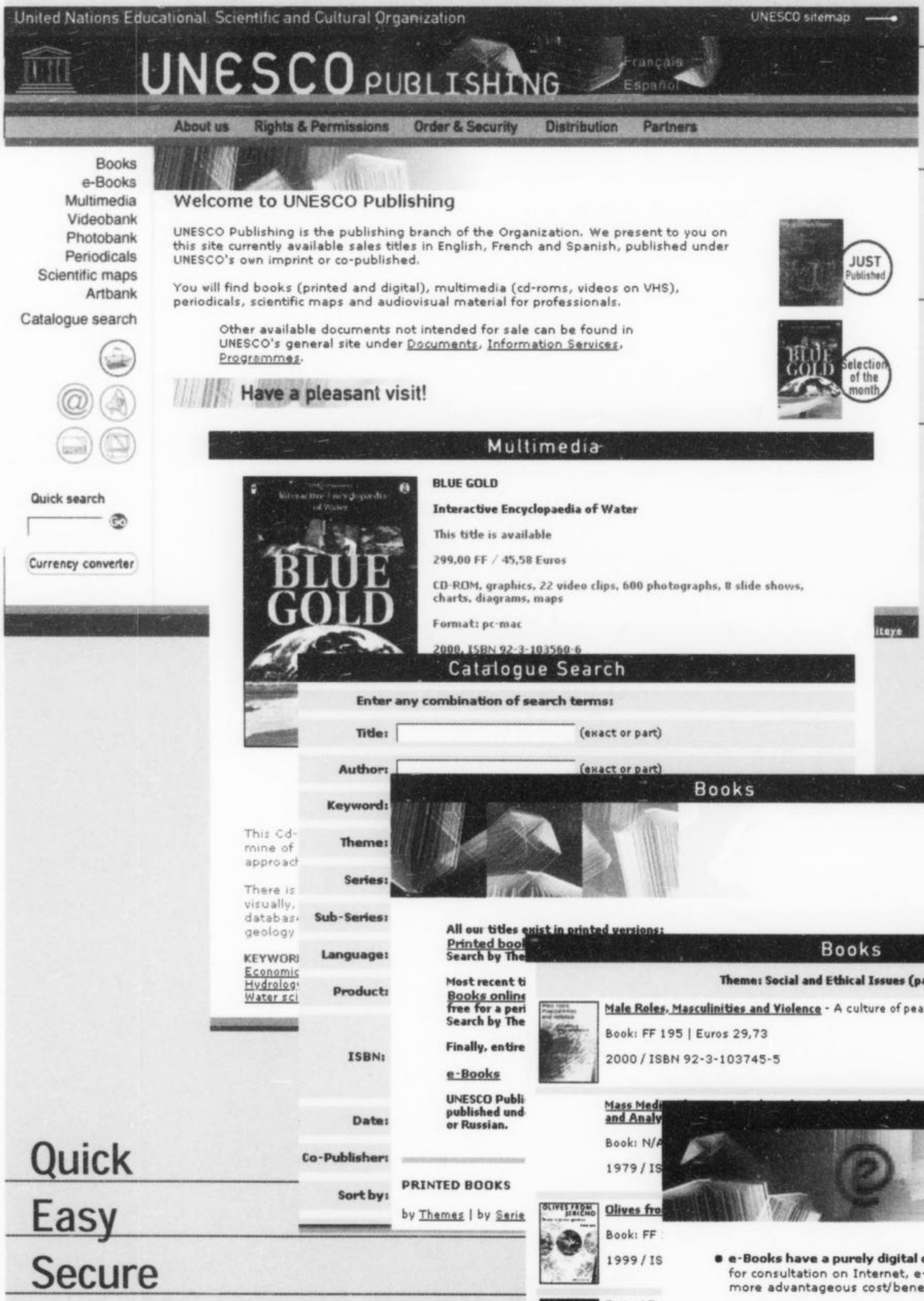
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Volunteers: the power of kindness

Teenagers in Ljubljana, retired Britons, disabled Filipinos, South African students.... Around the world, millions of volunteers are waging a battle to help their peers marginalized by economic hardship and violence. Along the way, they are generating a social capital that might still be invisible, but is destined to play a role as pivotal as the state and the market in years to come.

© Alain Pinoges/CIRIC, Paris
A volunteer in India.

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Distress

In a long interview (pp. 47-51), Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, one of the founding fathers of African literature, regrets that the term slavery is applied to extreme forms of exploitation, because it downplays the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yet, in many countries, including those industrialized, millions of children lead an existence that is tantamount to economic and sexual slavery. Working on the ground and through international awareness campaigns, NGOs are trying to change the tide (p. 38-40). A tide that does not seem to be shifting in India, where public opinion is poorly informed of the immense distress reigning in the country. This time, it is the press that is accused of giving the better part of its space to the mirages of the consumer society (pp. 44-46).

Solidarity

The year 2001 celebrates volunteers, the millions of women and men who tirelessly strive to stitch together social networks torn apart by economic crisis and violence. Alongside the state and the market, this third sector produces an invisible wealth (pp. 16-37). The fight against exclusion is also at the heart of Venezuela's ambitious education reform to reach the million or so children who don't go to school. But opponents denounce the move as an attempt at indoctrination (pp 13-15). A sense of solidarity should also guide states in tackling global warming. At the next climate conference in Bonn this July, it is to be feared that the self-interest of some countries will stand in the way of any significant action, despite scientists' alarming forecasts (pp. 10-12).

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Sydney: the beauty and the vice

PHOTOS BY TRENT PARKE; TEXT BY DAVID MARR

TRENT PARKE IS AN AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAPHER WHO SPENT FIVE YEARS DOCUMENTING SYDNEY STREET LIFE, WHICH RESULTED IN HIS BOOK "DREAM LIFE."
DAVID MARR IS A JOURNALIST WITH *THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD* AND AUTHOR OF A BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUSTRALIAN WRITER PATRICK WHITE.

© Trent Parke/Network/Rapho, Paris

Stepping into a quasi-divine light upon leaving the Opera House.

What happens when you live in a city that's a travel agent's dream? You start seeing yourself through tourist eyes, unless you open your umbrella and follow one of the locals around. Then, the mood shifts, but the city loses none of its magnetic power

Sydney is not the city of sunshine the world imagines it to be. It's a dark town. A port town. A damp city of heavy downpours and morning fog. Whole summers can be lost under wet grey skies. Winters are brief but uncomfortable.

Everything travel brochures say about blazing skies and summer heat is true, of course, but like an aunt with a nasty temper, Sydney's character is marked by grim shifts of mood. Winter westerlies cut like a knife. The sun isn't seen for days. Rain buckets down. ▶

Shadows advancing on Eddy Avenue.

Sydney: the beauty and the vice

Unfazed, bowlers huddle under their umbrella.

© Trent Parke/Network/Rapho, Paris

Everything travel brochures say about blazing skies and summer heat is true, of course, but like an aunt with a nasty temper, Sydney's character is marked by grim shifts of mood.

Then the umbrellas appear. Even more than London, Sydney is an umbrella town because it's all we need against the weather. Overcoats would be wonderful in those few cold weeks, but in Sydney a good coat is a luxury. Even raincoats aren't strictly necessary. You can live and die without one. In the city we shelter under that most Australian urban detail: shop awnings. But we all have umbrellas.

Those who have grown up here are not surprised by the dark, contradictory moods of the place. But something has changed since the tourists arrived. At first we wondered what they had come to see. Now, more and more, we see ourselves through their commercial eyes. Downpours are a breach of promise. Cold is a civic embarrassment. Poverty and corruption must be hidden from the outside world here on a few days' visit.

Sydney has been a corrupt town since the 1790s when soldiers guarding the convicts brought rum ships down from Calcutta. Booze was the currency of the first years of the colony. Human failings have been a source of corruption ever since: drink, gambling, drugs, prostitution.... Vice has fuelled both the commerce and religions of the town.

One of the strangest contradictions of this almost-Eden is the power of preachers and their talk of damnation and the apocalypse. They fear the beauty of the place will corrupt our souls. Odd prophets appear out of the dark with messages of fear and hope. They paint their slogans on the walls. Heaven and hell are just around the corner. Sydney's light collaborates in this Old Testament mood: the sun blazing under storm clouds, or laying gold over asphalt in the early evenings. Congregations aren't dwindling here.

Beauty can corrupt. Nothing is more characteristic of Sydney than the endless commercial pressure to have a slice of the harbour: a commercial wharf, a beach or a million-dollar view of the water. From the earliest days of white settlement, governments have been selling off the harbour. Sydney has perfected every way known of turning beauty into cash.

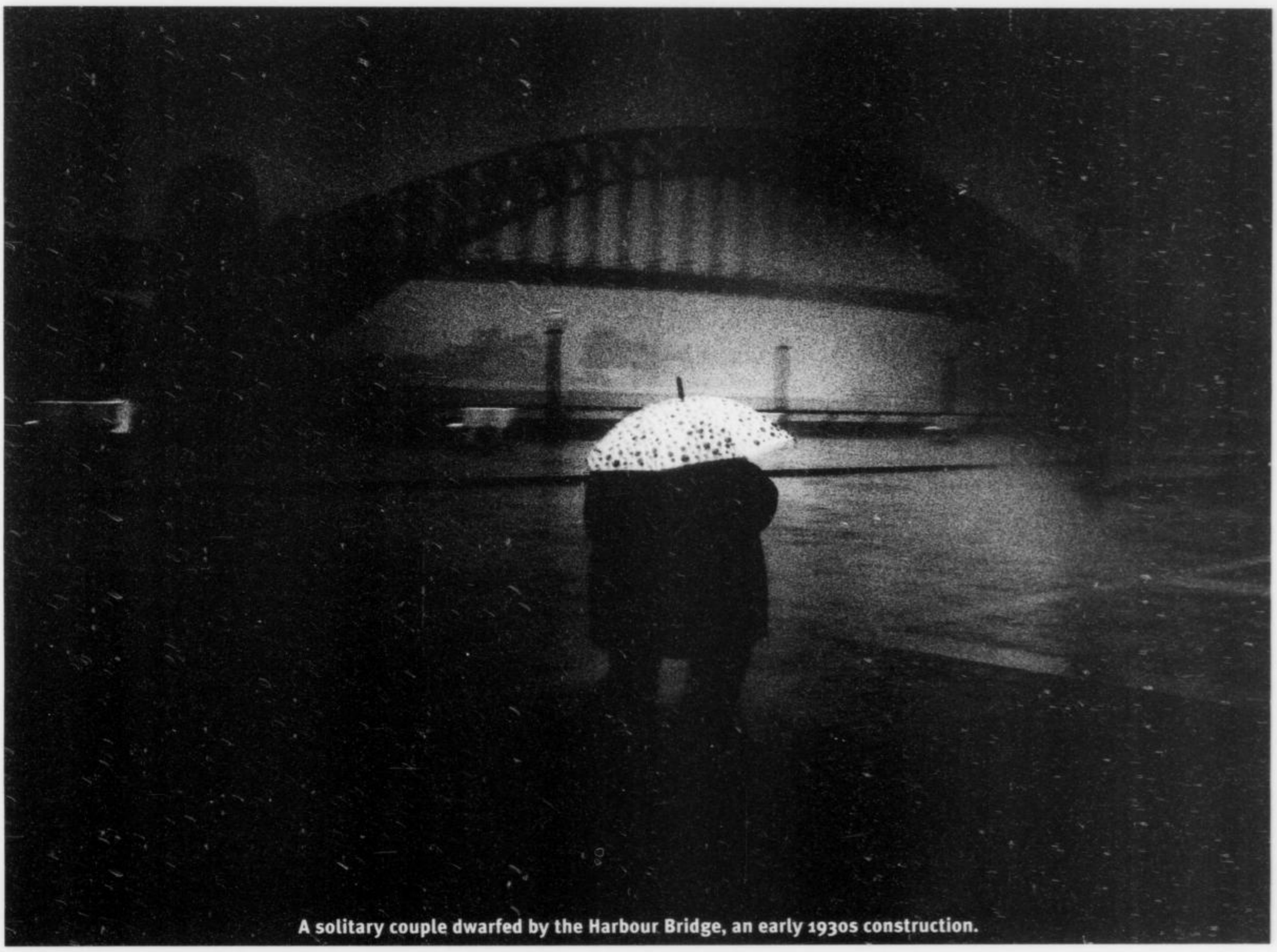
For the citizens of this town, the Bridge and Opera House have a special meaning. They are known all over the world: ▶

OLYMPIC CITY

Founded in 1788 when 11 convict-bearing ships of Britain's first fleet arrived from England to establish the colony of New South Wales, Sydney officially became a city in 1842. Today, it is a vibrant, multicultural metropolis, which is home to four million people and over 200 nationalities. More than a quarter of its residential population was born overseas—about 28% hail from Asia, 16.5% from Britain and Ireland, 16% from southern Europe and 8.5% from the Middle East, while a further 20% are children of migrants.

During the 2000 Olympics, held from September 15 to October 1, Sydney and its iconic Harbour seized the world stage, attracting nearly four million visitors and 11,000 athletes. A further 3.5 billion television viewers followed the Games, dubbed the "best ever" by the president of the International Olympic Committee. ■

The silhouette of an ocean liner echoes the profile of the Opera House, whose roof was designed to evoke a ship at full sail.



A solitary couple dwarfed by the Harbour Bridge, an early 1930s construction.

Sydney: the beauty and the vice

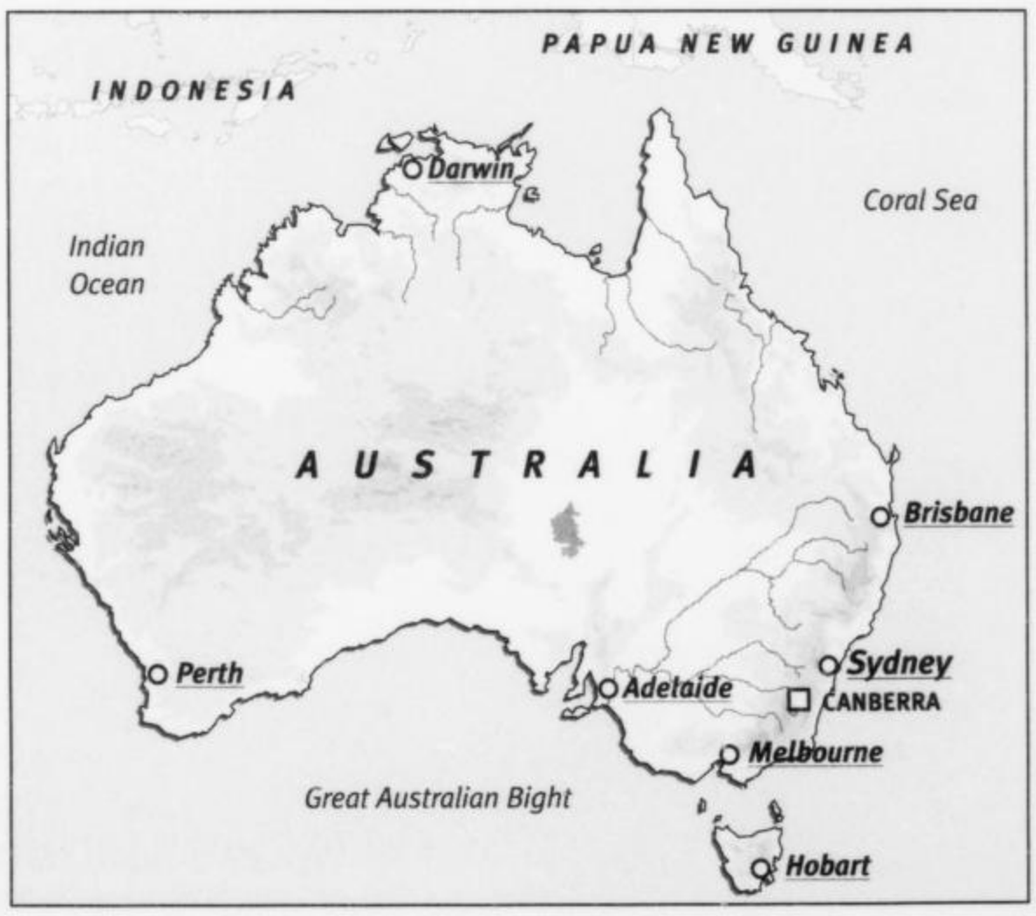
When summer storms hit, up go the ubiquitous umbrellas.

© Trent Parke/Network/Rapho, Paris

a British steel bridge from the 1930s and a Scandinavian fantasy conceived in the early 1950s that have become the symbols of a South Pacific city. But for Sydney people these two are spectacular, reassuring exceptions to the rule that almost everything built on the harbour is shabby, done for the worst motives, and fails to live up to what might be the most beautiful port in the world.

Not that we spend our lives gawping at them. Just as Parisians live with the Louvre and Cape Towners with Table Mountain, we live with the Bridge and the Opera House with easy pride. We put our heads under umbrellas and slosh past in the rain, aware but not giving them a thought. We're happy—even proud—to leave gawping to the tourists. But then on a winter day of strong sun we drive across the Bridge, or we arrive at the Opera House on an autumn evening when the moon is coming up over the water, and the beauty of the place seems brand new.

But trust Sydney: the mood will change. Thank God. Who would want to live in the city of travel agents' dreams? But the real Sydney is irresistible: dark, shabby and contradictory, full of strange sights and strange voices. As I write these notes on an early winter morning, the rain is pouring down. It's time to leave for work. I've left my umbrella somewhere—who knows where? I'm going to get soaked. ■



Learning to manoeuvre on slippery ground.

Global warming: ignorance is not bliss

At the seventh international climate conference that opens in Bonn, Germany on July 16, scientists will confirm their alarming forecasts while political leaders are likely to give them the cold shoulder. Why?

MICHEL BESSIÈRES

UNESCO COURIER JOURNALIST

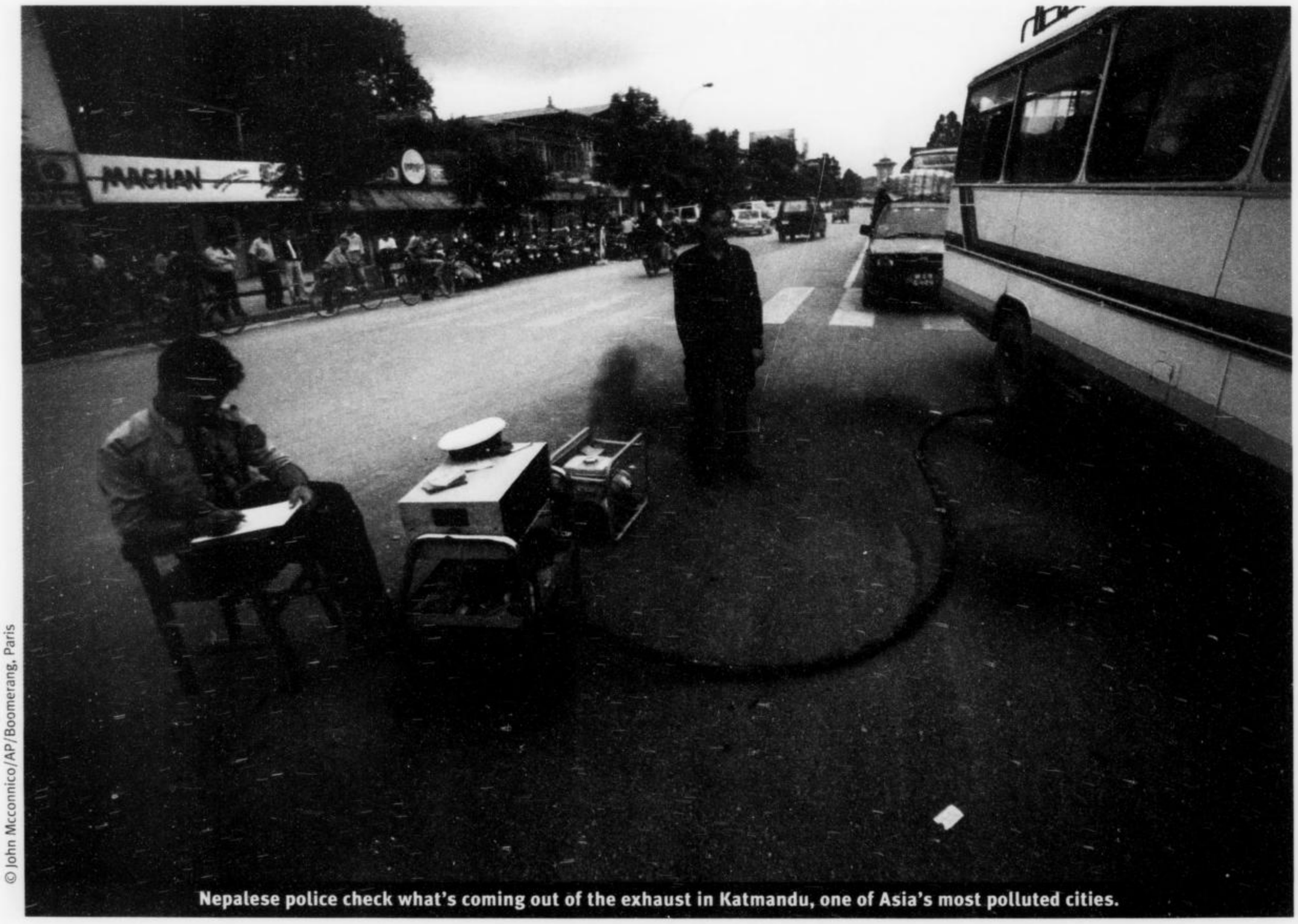
Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, nine years of negotiations on global warming have led virtually nowhere. Yet something has changed: the scientific community has gained extensive knowledge about the scope and causes of global warming, putting them in a more legitimate position than ever to alert governments. Meanwhile, public opinion is paying increasing attention to the problem. But, as Benjamin Dessus, a French expert and member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), writes: "we're standing before a real paradox: public will is still falling short, as though knowledge cripples action instead of prompting it."

Global warming is no longer a matter of controversy. The 20th century recorded the highest temperatures in 1,000 years, with an average increase of 0.6°C. The last two decades were the hottest of the 1900s.

A series of phenomena accompanies rising temperatures. For example, almost all the world's glaciers have shrunk, while the thickness of the polar ice cap has decreased by 40 percent (from 3.1 to 1.8 metres) in 50 years.

Scientists have yet to establish clear links between global warming and the increase in natural disasters such as droughts, storms and floods. But as the French physicist Hervé Le Treut says, these episodes "illustrate what might happen if global warming continues."

Is the current warming part of the cyclical phases that the planet has always experienced, or have greenhouse gas



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Nepalese police check what's coming out of the exhaust in Katmandu, one of Asia's most polluted cities.

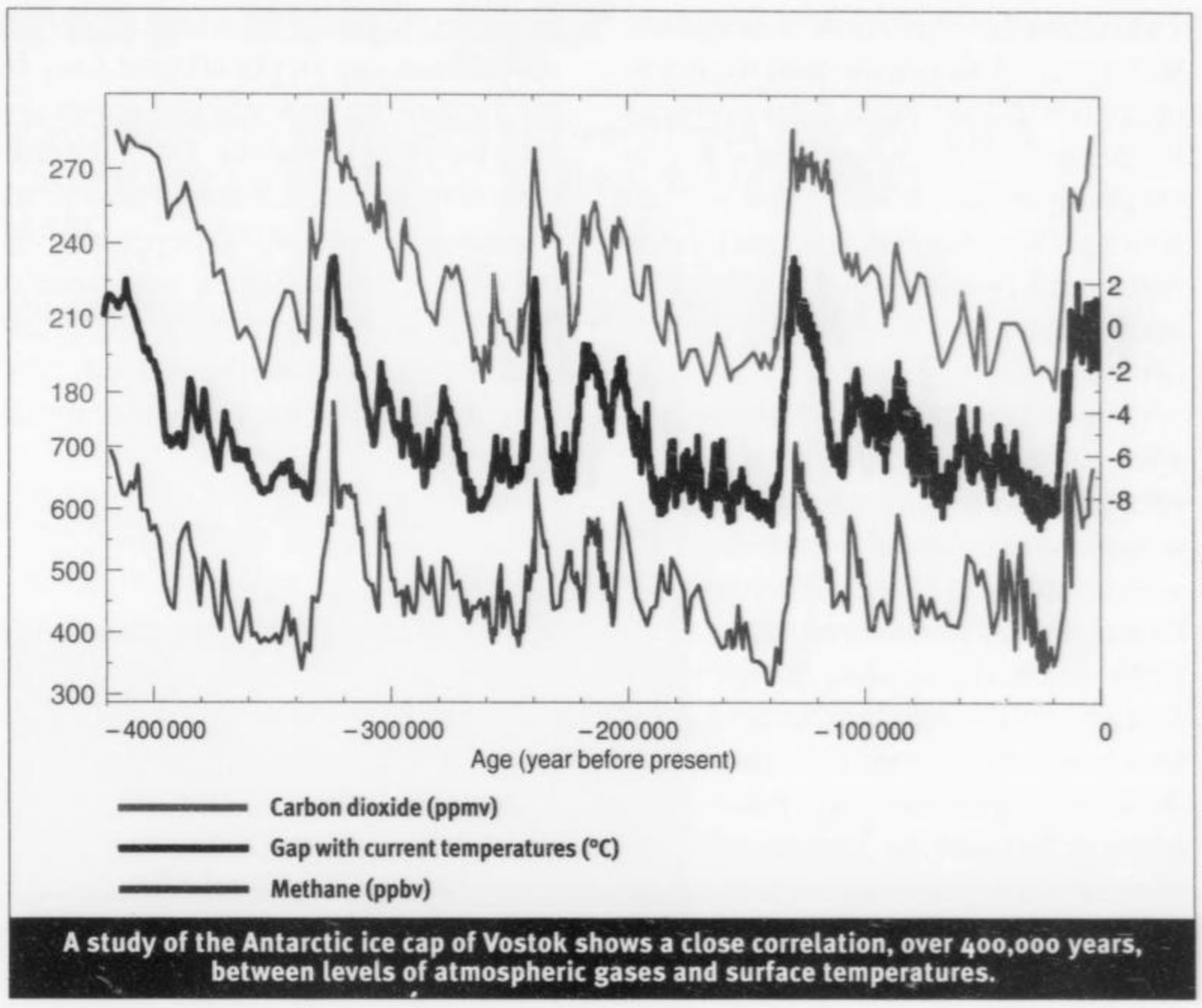
emissions resulting from human activities created new conditions? Almost all experts now defend the second hypothesis. Atmospheric levels of the main greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO_2), are steadily on the rise, increasing from 280 parts per million (ppm) at the dawn of the industrial revolution to over 360 ppm today. Forecasters say the figure will climb to between 540 and 970 ppm by the late 21st century.

Drought and disease

The scientific community has been sounding the alarm for a long time. The first world climate conference took place in Geneva in 1979. Nine years later, the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations set up the IPCC, an international network of over 3,000 researchers and experts that published reports in 1990, 1995 and 2001, each more alarming than the last. When the latest one came out in early 2001, Klaus Toepfer, director of the United Nations Environment Programme, said that "the scientific consensus now sounds the alarm in all the world's capitals."

The new report upwardly revised previous forecasts, predicting that temperatures will climb between 1.4 and 5.8°C by 2100—an increase that has been "unprecedented for 10,000 years"—and that ocean levels will rise between 10 and 90 centimetres. The report's second section focuses on global warming's economic and social consequences. Areas where cholera and malaria are endemic will spread, harvests will decrease in tropical and sub-tropical regions and drought will strike arid and semi-arid zones more frequently.

Global warming will worsen the imbalance between north and south because it will have a greater impact on poor countries, and because "those with the least resources have the lowest ability to adapt." By 2050, according to estimates, the world's population will have grown by three billion people to reach nine billion inhabitants, and electricity consumption will be 1.5 to 2.7 times higher than it is now. The fossil fuels responsible for the greenhouse effect will still account for 75 to 80 percent of total energy consumption, nuclear power four to seven percent and renewable sources (wind, sun and water) 20 percent at best.



© Laboratoire de glaciologie, Grenoble/Petit et al., *Nature* 399

A study of the Antarctic ice cap of Vostok shows a close correlation, over 400,000 years, between levels of atmospheric gases and surface temperatures.

A number of climate-related changes are expected (models do not exist for these phenomena at the present time). The most alarming one involves ocean currents, which are responsible for temperature exchanges between the planet's cold and hot regions. Two Swiss researchers, Thomas Stocker and Andreas Schmittner, say that the Gulf Stream—the circulation of current in the North Atlantic—could be interrupted when atmospheric CO_2 levels reach 750 ppm. That is precisely the figure that forecasters say will be reached during the course of the 21st century.

Specialists suggest combining technological solutions to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions. They range from using more efficient devices (low-voltage lamps, for example) to developing cogeneration (the combined production of heat and electricity) and using renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power. Industry has already cut its emissions worldwide (they still account for 19 percent of the total), but transportation has increased them by 75 percent.

Dessus says that the future depends less on technological breakthroughs than on priorities when choosing infrastructures. Put simply, will the Chinese and Indians choose the automobile or the train civilization? And, he adds, debate over transportation infrastructures must apply to energy and telecommunications networks as well. It is better to invest in small fossil energy deposits (coal or oil) intended for local consumption, which would be more energy-efficient than setting up heavy infrastructures, even if they are used for transporting cleaner energy.

Symbolic targets

Of course, scientists realize that their role is not to make political decisions. At the 1992 Rio summit, the participating countries signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This document is based on two principles: economic development in southern countries must not be hampered, and gas concentrations must be stabilized at levels that will not dangerously disrupt the climate. Industrialized countries were asked to make an effort. The 156 nations that ratified the convention, including the United States despite its recent shift into reverse, are still bound by their signature.

Since then, six conferences on the climate have tried to make headway. The only specific commitment dates back to the 1997 Kyoto Conference, when the industrialized countries gave themselves until 2012 to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2 percent. The convention will not enter into force until it is ratified by at least 55 countries ▶

accounting for 55 percent of emissions. So far only 33 nations, all from the developing world, have ratified the protocol. France is the only industrialized nation preparing to follow suit. Moreover, no major polluter has met its target. France, for example, was supposed to stabilize its emissions, but they have already risen by two percent.

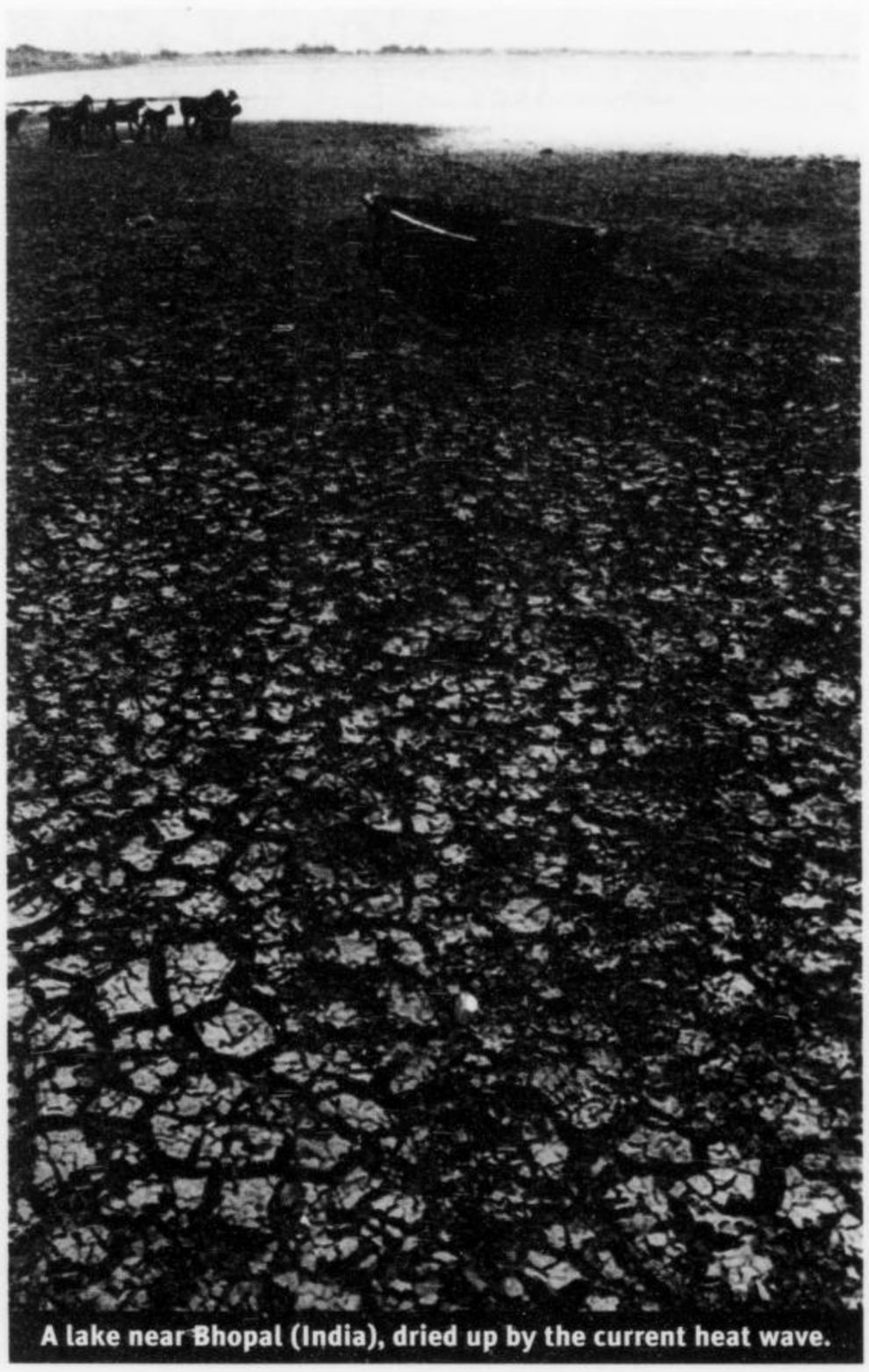
These targets, which have only a symbolic meaning for the environment, were supposed to usher in a new period of political commitment. They will not be met. The six international climate conferences that have taken place over the past nine years can be considered failures. As observers have stated, each country has put its national interests first, buckling under pressure from corporate lobbies. President George W. Bush's decision to renounce the Kyoto Protocol is a telling example. Commentators have pointed out that his political career, like that of vice-president Dick Cheney, has long been linked to the U.S. oil industry.

Thinking in millennia

In France, the government coalition of socialists, greens and communists has withdrawn its planned ecotax on industry consumption of fossil fuels one year before the June 2002 legislative elections, showing that the brisk pace of democratic politics is out of step with the slow rate of planetary changes. The oft-mentioned precautionary principle is still given lip service. "Every serious attempt to tackle the greenhouse effect will have immediate costs, whereas the benefits won't be apparent for a long time," writes John W. Anderson, an American environmental journalist with *Resources for the Future*. "To the extent that these potential benefits boil down to a catastrophe that might not occur, their impact will never be obvious. The costs, however, are."

Only negotiations on nuclear weapons can compare with the scope and gravity of the current climate talks. With the first, however, there was a sense of urgency. When it comes to global warming, it's as if solutions to curtail the problem can be put off until later. In the meantime, greenhouse gases are accumulating in the air. Even if emissions were reduced, it would take years (between 50 and 50,000 depending on the type of gas) for them to disappear from the atmosphere. As IPCC president Robert Watson has stated, "the time it takes to check environmental damage can't be measured in years or decades, but in centuries and millennia." This inertia—combined with the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere—should be taken as a motivation for immediate action. But the opposite has happened. Negotiators wrongly interpret it as an additional respite.

The discussions that began in Kyoto on trading "polluting credits" is a good illustration of that viewpoint. The "umbrella group" (the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Russia) has imposed the idea of market transactions by creating the right to purchase pollution credits from countries falling short of their quota, and to borrow against their future quotas. Behind this approach lies the idea that technological innovation and the market's creative capacity will provide solutions in time. Seen from that angle, countries see no point in imposing heavy legal constraints on themselves. As President Clinton said, "the American way of life is not negotiable."



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A lake near Bhopal (India), dried up by the current heat wave.

A plea for equity

The industrialized countries have the tacit conviction that market-driven technological progress will provide the answers. That is why they tend to reason in terms of tons of CO_2 per share of GDP.

For example, the Chinese release 3.93 tons of CO_2 into the atmosphere per $100 of GNP produced, Americans and Germans 4.6 and 7.7 times less, respectively. Seen from the developed countries' point of view, their model of energy efficiency is the best. Why should it be changed?

On the other hand, developing countries and many non-governmental organizations argue that international negotiations make no sense unless they are grounded in equity. That is why they would rather base calculations of CO_2 emissions on the number of inhabitants. Anil Agarwal, of the Centre for Science and Environment in Delhi (India), has figured that a single American releases as much greenhouse gas as 25 Indians, 33 Pakistanis, 85 Sri Lankans, 125 Bangladeshis and 500 Nepalese. He suggests allocating the same emissions quota to every human being.

This is where the public debate comes up against humanity's oldest moral dilemma. Should a tree be judged by its fruit, as implied by the U.S. position, which emphasizes energy efficiency? Or on the contrary, should the same rights be granted to all, as Agarwal argues? It is doubtful the issue will be settled at the Bonn conference. ■

With Bolivar we go

Taking aim at corruption and vested interests, Venezuela's government has launched a far-reaching education reform. Some see Cuba at the doorstep, while others applaud the will to shore up an ailing system

FABRICE LOSEGO, WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY *THE UNESCO COURIER*

FREELANCE JOURNALIST

The Venezuelan revolution is on the march, bearing education as its torch. Since sweeping to power as president in February 1999, Hugo Chavez, a former lieutenant-colonel who led a foiled coup seven years earlier, has launched an education reform unprecedented in the country's 200-year history.

Why education? "It's probably the most important battlefield in the process of change," said education minister Hector Navarro recently. "You can reform the economy, but for change to be irreversible, you first have to change the citizen." Throughout his campaign, Chavez tapped into public disaffection with the political system that has been dominated by the same two parties for 40 years. After being voted in, a new constitution was drafted. The country was renamed Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in homage to Simon Bolivar, the 19th-century father of Venezuelan independence and one of Chavez's foremost intellectual mentors. Then the government launched a radical shake-up of the education system, claiming it was plagued by corrupt practices and growing inequity. One of its prime targets is an "oligarchy" made up of privileged classes and the Church, whom the president accuses of robbing the poor of an education.

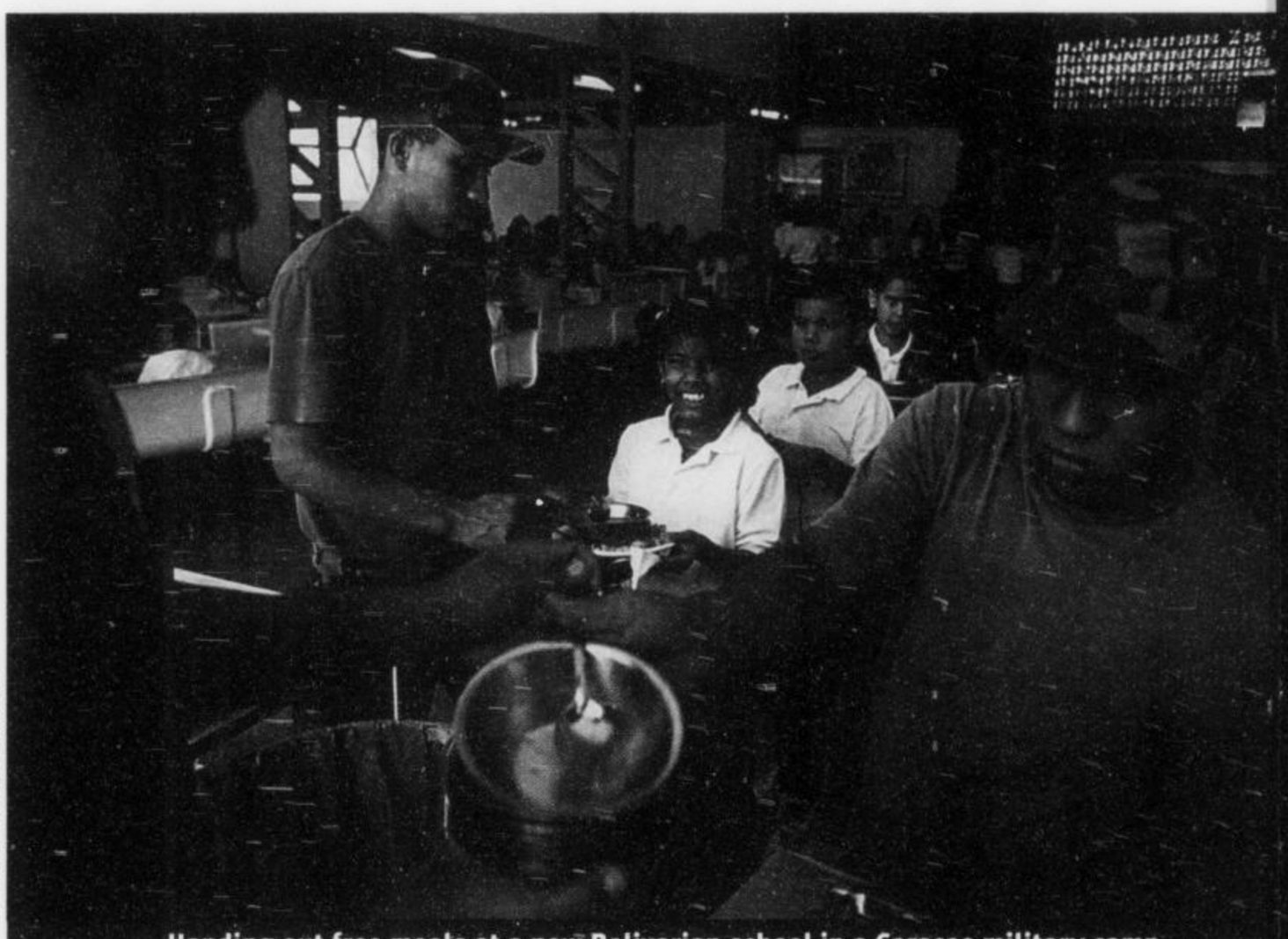
There's reason for concern. The marginalized formed the bedrock of Chavez's electoral base, and they're no minority. Twenty years ago, Venezuela boasted some of the highest quality of life indicators in Latin America. Today, it is estimated that two-thirds (14.6 million) of the population lives below the poverty line, while a further 7.5 million people (31percent) are classified as indigent.[1]

Education has suffered from the crisis. Spending fell from 7.4 percent of GDP in 1983 to 3.8 percent in 1998. The primary school completion rate stands at 84 percent, lagging behind the 94 percent Latin American average. "In the last 20 years, ▶

A mural depicting Cuban hero Jose Marti and Venezuela's Simon Bolivar graces a newly opened school aimed at poor children.

© Ivan Gonzalez/AP/Boomerang, Paris

Venezuela has gone through a transition from an 'education of castes to an education of masses,' considerably increasing coverage and widening opportunities," states an evaluation prepared for UNESCO. It notes, however, that "there has been a deterioration in indicators like repetition and dropout as well as in the quality and pertinence of the curriculum…Private education has been promoted as the 'channel of excellence.'" According to Abraham Zalzaman, one of the report's authors, "the whole education system is in need of deep change. Qualitatively, it's very weak."



© Fabrice Losego, Caracas

Handing out free meals at a new Bolivarian school in a Caracas military camp.

Patriotic revival

Against this backdrop, Chavez abolished registration fees in public schools, sent the armed forces into local communities to repair and build schools and hospitals, and launched a pilot programme aimed at underprivileged children. According to conservative estimates, the initiatives have already allowed 350,000 children to enroll (roughly 4.2 million children make up the basic school population), a figure the president has vowed to boost by the end of the year. During a visit to Venezuela in January 2001, UNESCO's Director-General Koichiro Matsuura commended Venezuela' "serious efforts" to promote basic education, reflected in an increase in education spending to 6 percent of GDP, well above the 3.9 percent average in developing countries.

So far, out of the 20,000 primary and secondary schools in the country, nearly 2,000 have been renamed Bolivarian. Their strong points: they offer eight hours of classes per day (most schools only go half days), free meals, medical care and sports. Patriotic symbols have acquired cult status in many of them. Classrooms have their "Bolivarian corners," where the flag, the national anthem and a portrait of the independence leader are displayed. The flag is raised every morning and children are briefed in the classroom on "Bolivarian principles," as mandated by the new Constitution.

These pilot schools give a taste of a profound attempt to reform the system, framed in the National Education Project. One of project's chief architects is Carlos Lanz, a sociologist and former guerrilla who spent eight years in prison for taking part in the kidnapping of an American businessman in the 1970s. Lanz does not shrug off his subversive past, but affirms that "there is no relationship between the armed struggle of those times and the proposals for educational reform put forward by the current government."

The project's ideological slant, however, is fairly blunt. The "new revolutionary education model" views globalization as a "colonialist threat … with serious implications for collective memory and national identity." The project laments that television and computers have "imposed values" in a "subtle form of domination and colonization." To confront this onslaught, the project advocates a school that will be "a space of cultural resistance and counter-hegemony, a place to reconquer the country's heritage and Indo-Afro-American roots." According to Carlos Casanova, a philosophy professor from Simon Bolivar University in Caracas, this turn represents "a loss of the western structure in Venezuelan society, and a negation of its Hispanic past."

"The project's anti-western thesis on the ends of education goes against the notion of transmitting universal values."

With the aim of making the country more efficient and "building an army of patriotic Venezuelans," secondary school students are required to follow pre-military instruction. A manual geared at 14-year-olds warns against "irrational immigration," notably from neighbouring Colombia. There are other bones of contention. In its will to "democratize education," the project advocates the establishment of "educational communities" to govern schools. These would extend the present system, composed of parents, teachers and the school principal, to the community at large, from local sports clubs to neighbourhood associations. The goal is for "schools to contribute to the formation of a participatory culture."

Private schools' associations, the Church and teachers' unions have seen red. In January 2001, some 5,000 parents and teachers marched through the streets of Caracas, the capital city, chanting "Chavez, don't mess with my children," and accusing the regime of indoctrinating youth in Cuban style. "The new regime is trying to 'infiltrate' schools to get its ideological message across," says Leonardo Carvajal, a professor from Andres Bello Catholic University, who also derides the idea of educational communities. "Each one will have its president, elected by whoever from the neighbourhood, be it the butcher, the carpenter or groups close to the regime." Carvajal spearheaded a counter-proposal for a new education law that was presented to the National Assembly. Intellectuals are railing against attempts to rewrite history books to

reflect the president's views. "Chavez wants to erase everything that happened between Bolivar and himself," says Guillermo Moron, a renowned historian and educator.

The signature of an "integrated cooperation accord" between Venezuela and Cuba in the field of education has hardly cleared the air. In exchange for 53,000 barrels of cheap oil per day, the country that scores best in international education tests in Latin America is committed to supplying Venezuela with teacher training consultants and other services. A team of 27 Cuban "experts" was invited to conduct a "Bolivarian Literacy Campaign" throughout Venezuela, while 1,600 Venezuelan teachers have already gone to the island to study the Cuban educational model. A foundation affiliated to the Ministry of Education recently sponsored a nationwide essay contest on "Che Guevara, Example for Youth."

Teachers' unions are fuming over Decree 1011, which would create a new echelon of senior school inspectors, armed with wide powers to recommend dismissals. The government argues they are required because entrenched supervisors turn their back on corrupt practices, while opposition politicians are concerned the decree will be used to fire teachers who "resist teaching Chavez's anti-imperialist, anti-elitist and anti-corruption ideology."

Modernization or revolution?

Some longtime educational experts insist on cutting through the rhetoric . "We're a very long way from a second Cuba," says Abraham Zalzaman, president of the Institute for Studies in Education Technology and Training and co-author of the UNESCO evaluation. "We've signed accords with Cuba as we have with Europe and the U.S. on other matters." Opposition to Decree 1011 is hardly surprising. "It's the first time that we're talking about corruption," says Zalzaman. "Private education has become more of a business than a service... If there was a supervision system in place worthy of the name, a lot of schools would be closed," he said, referring to bribes sometimes paid to officials to get around stringent rules governing the opening of new privately run schools.

Some regret that for now, the project has not focused on the nuts and bolts of learning. "It's a partisan political project," says Mariano Herrera, coordinator of the Centre for Cultural and Educational Investigations. "Our children need to learn how to read and write before anything else. Also, the project's anti-western thesis on the ends of education goes against the notion of transmitting universal values and respecting other cultures."

Carlos Lanz defends the government's position in the face of poverty and globalization. "Their mistake [referring to those opposed to the project] is neutrality. They speak like us about forming citizens, but without recognizing the conflicts, interests and power relationships inherent in society. For those people, there is neither weak nor strong, while we openly take the side of the underprivileged, the oppressed. We have to place ourselves in the context of Venezuela's revolution, which is about anti-oligarchy and anti-imperialism. Education has to reflect these traits."

"The discourse is very aggressive," concedes Zalzaman. "A lot of the proposed changes have been poorly presented. But there's nothing revolutionary about the reform. It's a push towards modernization. For the first time in 40 years, we're starting to have a real political debate. There's a discourse that's going to revitalize the country and give a voice to those 84 percent who live in poverty. Of course, the middle class feels threatened." ■

1. *Source: Venezuela Country Profile by* The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2000.

Mariano Herrera*: "Teachers at a loss"

What is the state of education in Venezuela?
Very poor. For instance, 40 percent of youth between 15 and 24 dropped out of school even before reaching high school. There are two million young people between 10 and 24 years old who don't go to school or have a job. But it's not only the fault of the education system. Extreme poverty, which affects more than half the Venezuelan population, is an important factor of exclusion from school. It's a vicious circle that has to be broken.

Many observers claim that teachers are poorly trained.
They're not trained enough to teach the basics, namely reading and writing. In 1980, there was teacher-training reform. From a two-year course centred on practical problems such as working with a class of young children, we've shifted to a five-year university training which is much more theoretical. University mainly trains English, biology or literature teachers and plenty of civil servants specialized in planning, statistics and the economics of education. But when it comes to teaching children how to read and write, young teachers are at a loss.

And students only study 900 hours a year...
That's the way it is in most Latin American countries. There are not enough schools for everyone. With the return to democracy in 1961, there was a sense of urgency and a "massive literacy plan" was launched. "Temporary" schools were built because we were lagging so far behind and had to move fast. The problem is that the provisional slowly became permanent, and now we have schools with zinc roofs in 60°C heat that are falling into ruin. To make up for the lack of schools, we invented the double-shift, whereby each school welcomes two different sets of students every day. Teachers are obliged to run from one school to another, sometimes up to three in a day, just to make a half-decent living.

Why didn't Venezuela invest more in education at the time of the oil boom?
Many underdeveloped countries did the same, especially in South America. Oil suddenly made Venezuela a rich country in terms of per capita income but it stayed underdeveloped in terms of the money allocated to education. An elitist system was set up that favoured the development of universities to the detriment of primary and secondary schools. Today, the country's universities absorb nearly half the total education budget.

** General coordinator of the Centre for Cultural and Educational Investigations (Caracas).*

VOLUNTE

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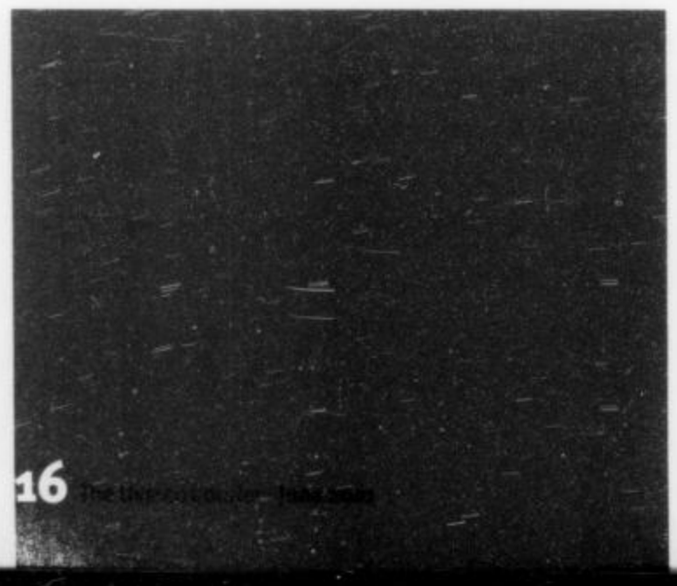
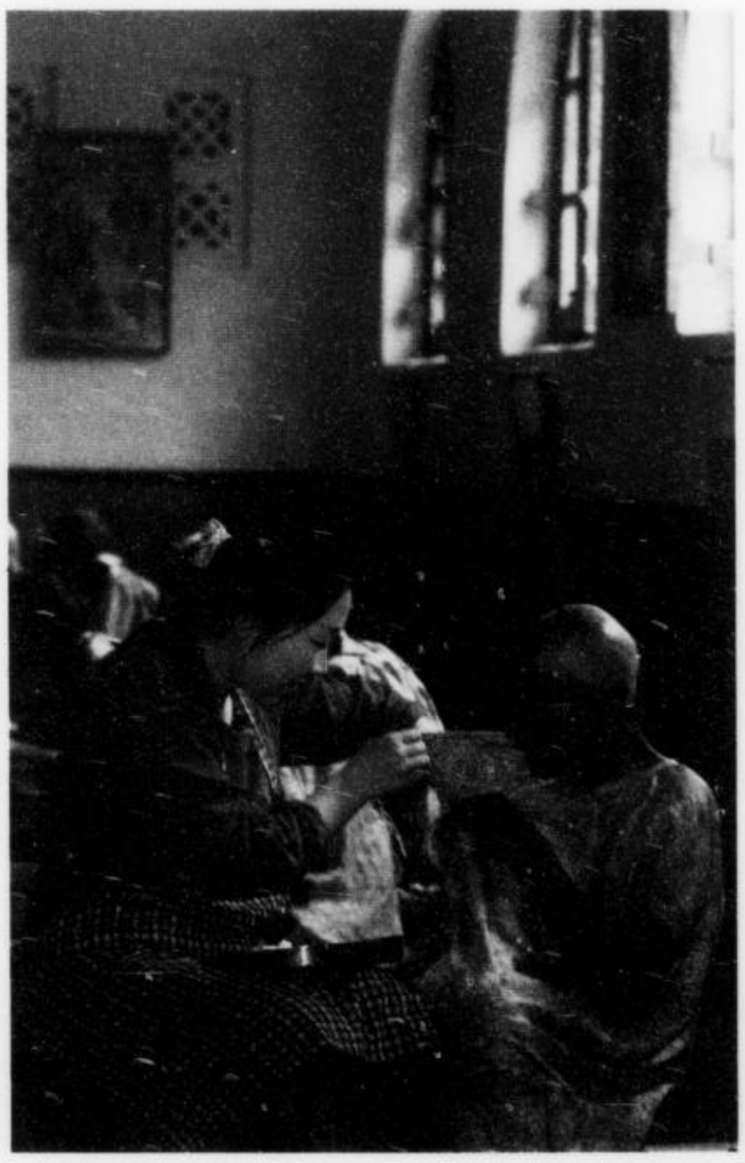


Alfredo Olivera, a young Argentine psychiatrist, launched a radio station to give patients in a Buenos Aires psychiatric hospital the chance to express themselves and get in touch with the outside world (pp. 18-19). Oliveira is not driven by a quest for adventure or an attraction for the marginal. Like millions of volunteers around the world, he is striving to stitch together social networks torn apart by exclusion and violence. As the promoters of the International Year of Volunteers 2001 highlight, giving one's time is a source of enrichment, though the efforts are often invisible and yield benefits far beyond mere economic value (pp. 20-21). Throughout the 20th century, such voluntary initiatives have steadily expanded (pp. 22-23). Volunteers don't perceive their work as a gift, but an exchange (p. 26). Young Slovenians have started up a hotline to help their peers in trouble (p. 27). In Brazil, company employees are mobilizing in reaction to their ailing state (pp. 28-29). Carmen Reyes Zubiaga of the Philippines is setting an example, showing disabled people like herself that they can live in dignity (pp. 30-31). In India, women who have been victims of domestic violence are helping others fend for themselves (pp. 31-32), while in South Africa, students are spending their holidays working in the most underprivileged communities (pp. 33-34). Volunteering has no age limit: in Britain, pensioners are recycling tools sorely lacking in the Third World (pp. 34-35). So alongside the state and the market, the non-profit sector—also known as the third sector—is flourishing. But its potential should not be overestimated: collaboration with the other sectors rather than separate action is the best hope for achieving meaningful social progress (pp. 36-37).

Dossier concept and co-ordination by Lucía Iglesias Kuntz, UNESCO Courier *journalist.*



ERS:

r of kindness

OPINION

EFFORTS IN **INVISIBLE INK**

BY SHARON CAPELING-ALAKIJA

EXECUTIVE COORDINATOR OF THE BONN-BASED UNITED NATIONS VOLUNTEERS PROGRAMME

The current International Year of Volunteers has one overarching aim: to bring about widespread recognition of the millions of people around the globe who, through voluntary acts, play a significant role in fostering social cohesion within communities. They are bringing light into a troubled world. The problem is that this light has been hidden under a bushel for far too long. Governments are encouraged to endorse pro-volunteer policies and see volunteerism for what it is worth—an important chunk of what we now refer to as "social capital."

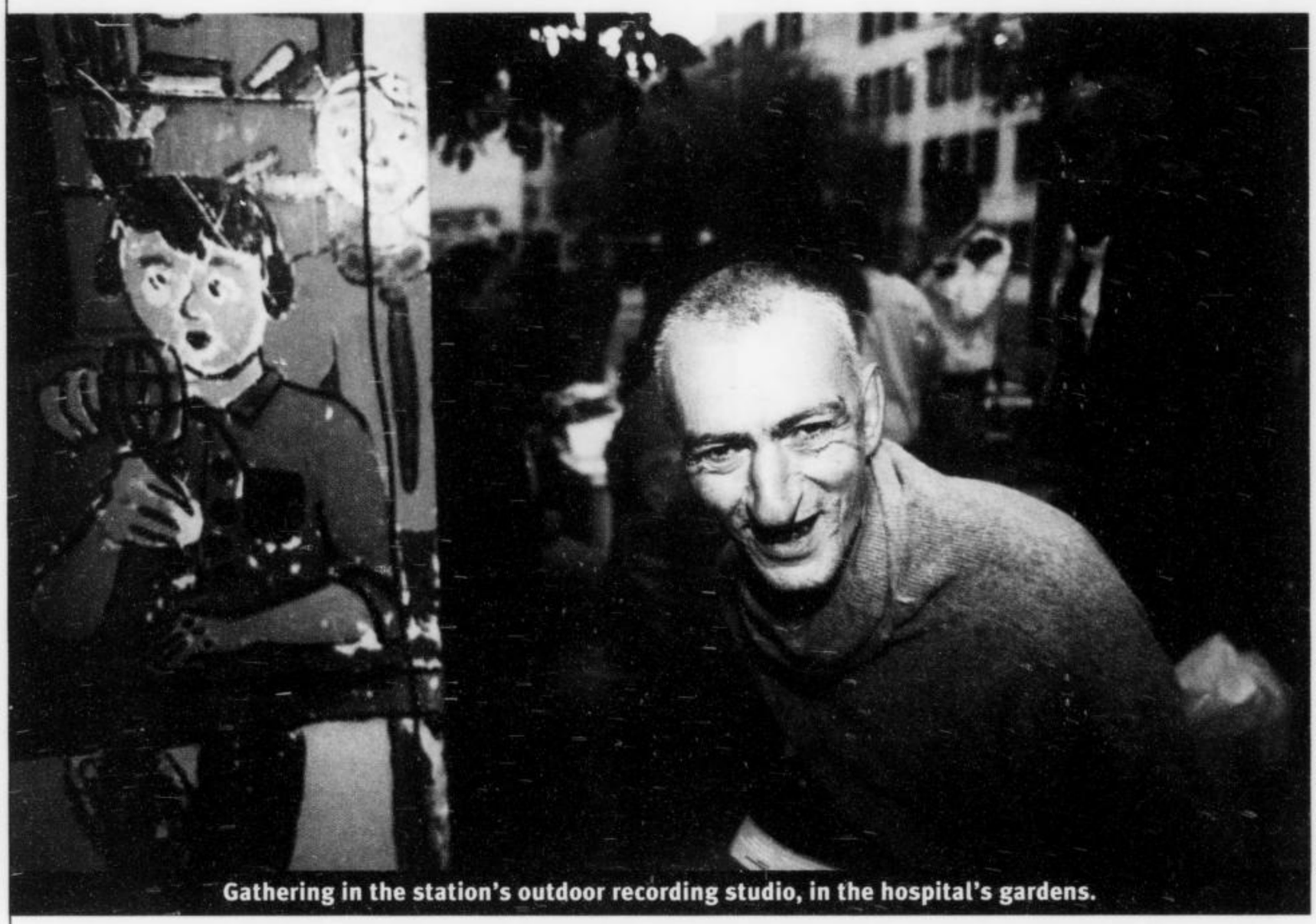
There are strong arguments for taking a closer look at the impact of volunteer work. In recent decades, we have witnessed how war and civil strife in scores of countries have driven families from their homes. Displaced people and refugees have lost their bearings and must start anew with neighbours who may or may not share their cultural tradition and values. Voluntary efforts by the victims of conflict, often supported by volunteers outside the affected communities, are a critical factor in helping to reinvent social cohesion in new settlements. Conflict is not the only cause for a breakdown in social cohesion. Migrant groups flooding urban areas in many developing countries have a similar effect. In every case, we need to tap into the volunteer potential and extend our effectiveness in fostering social cohesion.

Over the years, we have shifted from seeing volunteerism uniquely as a one-way, North-South street. We are learning to combine the strengths of domestic and international volunteers of all nationalities, sharing skills for the betterment of communities. Volunteers work in service functions within organizations, but also informally and spontaneously. For far too long, we have neglected the contributions of mutual aid groups looking out for the interests of neighbours. Their efforts are recorded in invisible ink. Through survey research at the national level, we can gain a better appreciation of their achievements and suggest how governments, the UN system and other external actors can promote a positive environment for volunteerism to flourish at the local level.

Another broadening avenue is corporate volunteering. Employees are given time off to volunteer in their communities, or to take off a few weeks to assist people in another part of the world and, at the same time, broaden their own experience. Although it is starting to pick up speed, the private sector can take corporate volunteering much further. It is more than good PR—it builds a stronger, more enlightened and cohesive work force. We are also encouraged to see the new waves of volunteers—working from home or office computers—who donate time to organizations worldwide through the UNV-powered online volunteer service (http://app.netaid.org/OV). These gifted homemakers, students, professors and employees make the most of their time, for the benefit of others.

A word of caution: as volunteers of good will, we must counter negative impulses in our societies and shed light on the activities of racists and extremists, who, in the name of cohesion, wage violent hate campaigns.

Now is our time to build networks globally to facilitate and promote volunteer action. This is what IYV 2001 is all about, and close to 15,000 individual volunteers and organizations have already registered their support for this occasion. We are talking about an expanding constituency of volunteers. They want to be heard, to be understood for what they accomplish, and taken seriously for the tremendous contributions they make to society. ■



Gathering in the station's outdoor recording studio, in the hospital's gardens.

© Tamara Pinco, Buenos Aires

When patients take **the mike**

How the dogged efforts of a young psychologist are keeping patients in a Buenos Aires mental hospital in touch with the outside world

SOLEDAD VALLEJOS

JOURNALIST WITH THE ARGENTINE DAILY *PAGINA/12*

"I miss you, Dad, I miss you, I know. Will you be all right in Rosario?"

"He's called Rosario," explains Perrota into his microphone. One of over 900 patients in Buenos Aires' José T. Borda Psychiatric Hospital, Perrota helps host *Radio La Colifata* (Radio Crazy), a station that transmits what patients have to say for five hours every Saturday. The recording studio is a table set up in the hospital gardens, while a blackboard attached to a tree lists the afternoon's programmes: "Visits," "Rock," "Teenage problems," "Sports news" and "Dead Mute."

Around 30 people—patients who are not taking part, visitors and other station staff—are listening intently to "A Romantic Moment." Perrota tells his life story: how he came to the hospital, how a girlfriend had helped him as much as she could, how hard it can be to get a job and return to the outside world after you are discharged. "I just want to get out," he says. "This is just temporary for me, for everyone. We all dream of getting out of here."

A curly-haired young man operating the sound equipment picks up the microphone to tell Perrota that in two months' time, CDs of the radio broadcasts will be available, and that with his experience as a salesman and role in helping build up the station, he will once again be given a job.

The announcement comforts Perrota. It also shows the progress made by a project that began 10 years ago when Alfredo Olivera, the very same curly-haired man operating the equipment, was a psychology student who wanted to help out where he could. In those days, the hospital had weekly art and craft workshops "attended by patients who were wandering around," Olivera recalls. "I spent nine months going from workshop to workshop, but I could see that what was being done started and ended right there."

Olivera wanted to do something different, to "work with the outside world, with the wider community."

It is no shock to learn that aside from getting an appalling press, neuropsychiatrists in many institutions actually live up to their reputation. Even today, the Borda Hospital is intimately linked in both public image and physical reality to all that is unwanted and dreaded. Located about 30 blocks from Argentina's political and economic centre, it is a place where time has stopped. Some of the patients will never walk the streets again, others will never

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see their families again. Some have spent more than half their lives inside. Hundreds of people live in vast, forgotten wards. As is customary in the Argentine public health system, doctors are few and those specialized in treating mental patients fewer. All this went through Olivera's mind as he thought about how to renew the patients' contact with the outside world.

"I knew someone who had a programme on an FM community radio station, *SOS* in San Andrés, and he asked me to talk about what it was like inside Borda as part of a programme on insanity. Instead I suggested that the patients themselves talk about their problems."

The next Saturday, Olivera told the patients of his idea, and took a tape-recorder to the workshops, stressing that "what they said would go on the air and was a way of getting back in contact with society.

"One of the patients then said 'I want to talk about why women are strange.' Another said 'I want to tell jokes.' Another said he wanted to draw, and so on. They began to speak. It was wonderful."

Olivera was delighted with the first recording, and other meetings followed until finally the radio station called him. He took along a small sample (roughly edited with a twin cassette machine) of some of the conversations about madness and mental hospitals, and "we began to encourage listeners to call the station and ask the patients questions."

"We're hoping this will be an example of how to work with people rejected because of psychological problems."

The Borda patients' show soon became a weekly fixture on the San Andrés community radio. According to the dictionary of *lunfardo*—a Buenos Aires dialect— *colifato* means someone who is "odd, half-crazy or disturbed." It was the name taken from a list drawn up by the patients and voted for by listeners.

Gradually, while dividing his time between the faculty and his steady job, Olivera managed to get other stations to broadcast snippets about what was happening in Borda until eventually the patients' own radio station was born. Thanks to these efforts, and without any financial or technical help from any institution, *La Colifata* is now retransmitted by about 50 stations. It was invited to the World Communication Congress that the Buenos Aires Press Workers' Union (UTPBA) hosted last year, and for the second year running had a stand at the Buenos Aires International Book Fair.

With the help of a short-wave radio enthusiast who regularly tuned in, the programmes have even been relayed to Miami and the Antarctic. And, just like any other station, its reporters have regular seats in the press box at Boca Júniors' football stadium.

But the station's boss, a psychologist who was overwhelmed by requests for advice and has already lost count of the talks he has given about the station, still lives on what he earns as a researcher. He flatly refuses, however, to see his work as that of a saint. He began as a volunteer and remains one. *La Colifata* has kept on broadcasting because he and nine other people work for free, and because solidarity still counts for something.

"Some listeners found out from a magazine article that we lugged all the equipment each week by train and bus from my house to Borda and back," he says, "so they called us up and gave us a second-hand Citroen." Soon afterwards, when the patients launched a campaign to collect money for street children, the car became a sort of taxi service. "When someone couldn't manage to bring their donation to the hospital, I went with two patients in the car and knocked at their door. The patients were no longer just deprived urchins, but had their medium, the radio, and used it to help other people."

Another listener, this time in Bariloche, 1,500 kms southwest of Buenos Aires, even offered holidays for some patients, who were thus given the opportunity to leave the hospital for the first time in years. "They did a broadcast from the civic centre there before 300 people. The experience changed them, it was wonderful. And then there was another trip to the coast. One patient from Bolivia had never seen the sea before." It was also thanks to listeners' gifts that the station received new recording equipment.

Since all the patients taking part have their own particular psychological disorders, working with them on the radio has also taught Olivera a lot about his profession. Each time he goes on air, he has a therapeutic objective and knows why he says what to whom. Currently, and for a token fee, he is looking after one patient who managed to get a discharge from the hospital.

But he scoffs at those who like to call him a hero. "People commonly put two or three ordinary people on a pedestal and say how wonderful they are. We're trying to get beyond this because the project works and is flourishing. We're hoping that in 30 years, this will be seen as an example of how people can work with those who are rejected because of psychological problems."

For this to come true, the next step is proper training for volunteers. In places like Argentina, this is probably the challenge such work faces for it to survive and not be canonized in the void. ■

colifata@elsitio.net

History depends solely on the will of man.

Jorge Guillén, Spanish poet (1893-1984)

1. A GLOBAL FORCE

Volunteering, capital of the **future**?

Governments are waking up to the economic and social benefits of volunteering, but should not rely on it as a stopgap for solving society's ills

JUSTIN DAVIS SMITH

DIRECTOR OF THE LONDON-BASED INSTITUTE FOR VOLUNTEERING RESEARCH (WWW.IVR.ORG.UK)

In a telling recognition of volunteering's place in society, the United Nations General Assembly will meet this December to debate how governments can do a better job of supporting those who contribute to their communities without any financial return. It is an apt culmination to the International Year of Volunteers that has mobilized people in 130 countries.

It is hardly surprising that governments around the world are waking up to volunteering's economic and social benefits. In the United Kingdom, for example, volunteering contributes an estimated £40 billion ($64 billion) to the economy, whilst in Canada its economic value has been put at $16 billion. A recent comparative study in 22 countries estimated that volunteers put in hours equivalent to the work of 10.5 million full-time employees!

But there are dangers in solely drawing attention to these economic justifications, even though they can raise the status of volunteering, in much the same way as the women's movement has long argued in relation to household work.

Governments might be tempted to replace paid workers with volunteers to save money. For one, this overlooks the fact that volunteering requires investment and training to yield a return: a recent study in Europe estimated that every dollar invested in volunteering brought eight in return.

From gift to exchange

More importantly, growing evidence supports what volunteers throughout the world have long known, namely that it is good for society. Academics have developed the notion of social capital to describe the links and connections made by individuals through volunteering. Some studies have suggested that a society rich in social capital will tend to have lower rates of crime, lower levels of school absenteeism and inter-racial conflict, and (coming full circle to economics again) higher levels of economic growth.

A volunteer doctor from the NGO Casa

While this capital has a role to play in building strong and active communities, it can only be maximized in certain conditions. Volunteering works best in the context of a healthy and well-resourced public sector. It is not a substitute for government services but rather an essential complement—adding value to the services provided by paid professionals. As an essential ingredient of a healthy, democratic society, governments have a vested interest in its promotion, even when volunteers are involved in campaigning activities and speak out against public policies.

The benefits to the volunteers themselves should not be underestimated. It used to be said that volunteering was based on the idea of a gift relationship. Now, most people see it as an exchange, where both giver and receiver benefit in equal measure. Volunteers are quick to cite a rich list of benefits,

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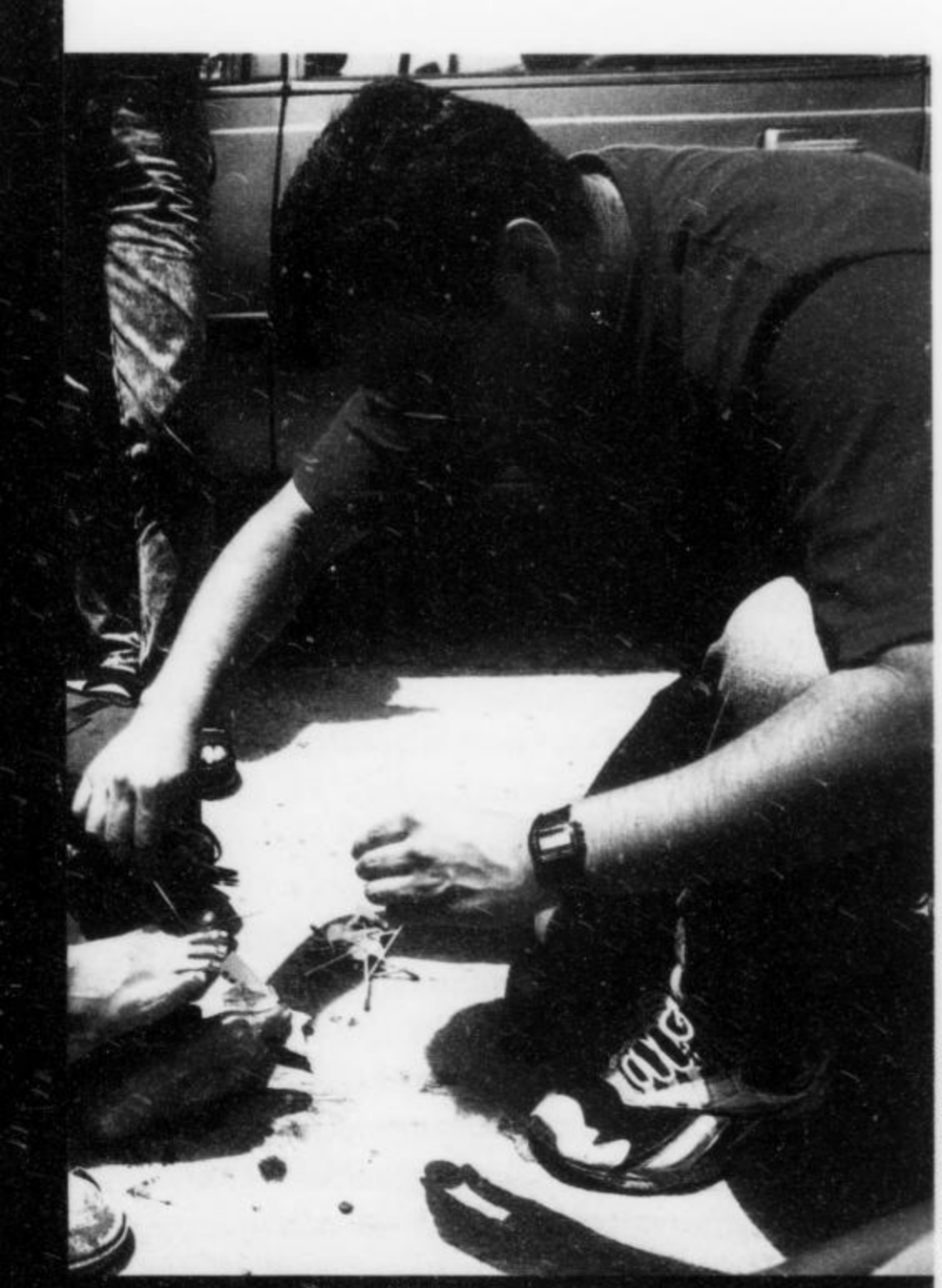
from meeting friends to learning new skills and gaining a different perspective on life.

Those suffering from social exclusion are particularly likely to benefit. Disabled people taking part in volunteering can aid social integration and challenge the negative stereotypes of themselves as passive recipients of care. For the young, volunteering offers opportunities for self-development and risk-taking, and provides a valuable grounding in citizenship.



© Mike Kolloffel/Still Pictures, London

nza treating a street child in Guatemala.

For senior citizens, it could help the process of 'active ageing'—some research has even suggested that volunteering is good for health! In short, volunteering provides a classic win/win situation, benefiting both the volunteer and society.

Removing barriers

Still, barriers to participation remain: in some countries there is no freedom of association, while in others, legislation may work against involving certain groups, such as the unemployed. Organizations may be unable to pay travel expenses for volunteers, thus penalising those with the lowest incomes. There may also be attitudinal barriers — some people may reject volunteering as old-fashioned and outmoded — or institutional ones: organizations may be reluctant to develop opportunities for volunteers to get involved.

Governments have a role to play in removing these barriers, by creating an environment — legal, fiscal and institutional — in which people are able to volunteer. The Dutch government, for example, has decided to scrutinize or "proof" all new legislation to maximise its impact on volunteering.

Employees on the go in Japan

Governments also have a key role to play in funding the organization or information technology infrastructure at the national and local levels, to enable volunteering to flourish. As major employers, they can encourage staff to play an active role in their local communities. Taking on board emerging evidence of the benefits of volunteering on staff morale, team-building and business profile, more and more employers—in the public and private sectors—are encouraging their staff to get involved in volunteer activity.

Japan's Osaka Gas Company, for example, launched a scheme called "Chiisa na Tomoshibi" or "Tiny Lamplight" in 1981. By 1994, a staggering 13,500 staff were involved in the volunteer scheme, which entailed employees participating in a range of community services. The company promoted volunteerism by allowing staff to take leave ranging from 10 days to 12 months. Retired staff and the families of employees were also encouraged to participate in social welfare activities.

Though governments have their role to play in endorsing pro-volunteer policies, they must also recognize their limitations. The volunteering movement rightly cherishes its independence, and any attempt by the state to control its agenda must be fiercely resisted. ■

Societies need to recognize and promote volunteerism as a valuable activity. And they must encourage volunteer action at home and abroad.

Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General (1938-)

WHAT IS VOLUNTEERING?

Ask a group of people what volunteering means and you're likely to get a whole range of answers. For some, it conjures up images of people helping the less fortunate–providing assistance to children, the ill, the elderly or the blind. For others, it means campaigning for change—getting involved with a local environmental pressure group or supporting a global drive to abolish landmines. For yet others, it is about the struggle for survival—working with friends and neighbours to garner the essentials of everyday life.

Whatever form it takes, voluntary activity stands apart from paid work or leisure in three ways. Firstly, it is not carried out primarily for monetary gain. Secondly, it is carried out freely and without coercion. Thirdly, volunteering must benefit the community, although it can be rewarding for the volunteer, often in intangible ways.

While some societies are richer in volunteering than others, we need to be careful about adopting a league-table approach to measuring this activity. Given the variety of forms it takes, we run the risk of overstating the divisions between industrialized countries—which are perhaps richer in formal volunteering—and developing ones, where the informal tradition of volunteering is often more pronounced. ■

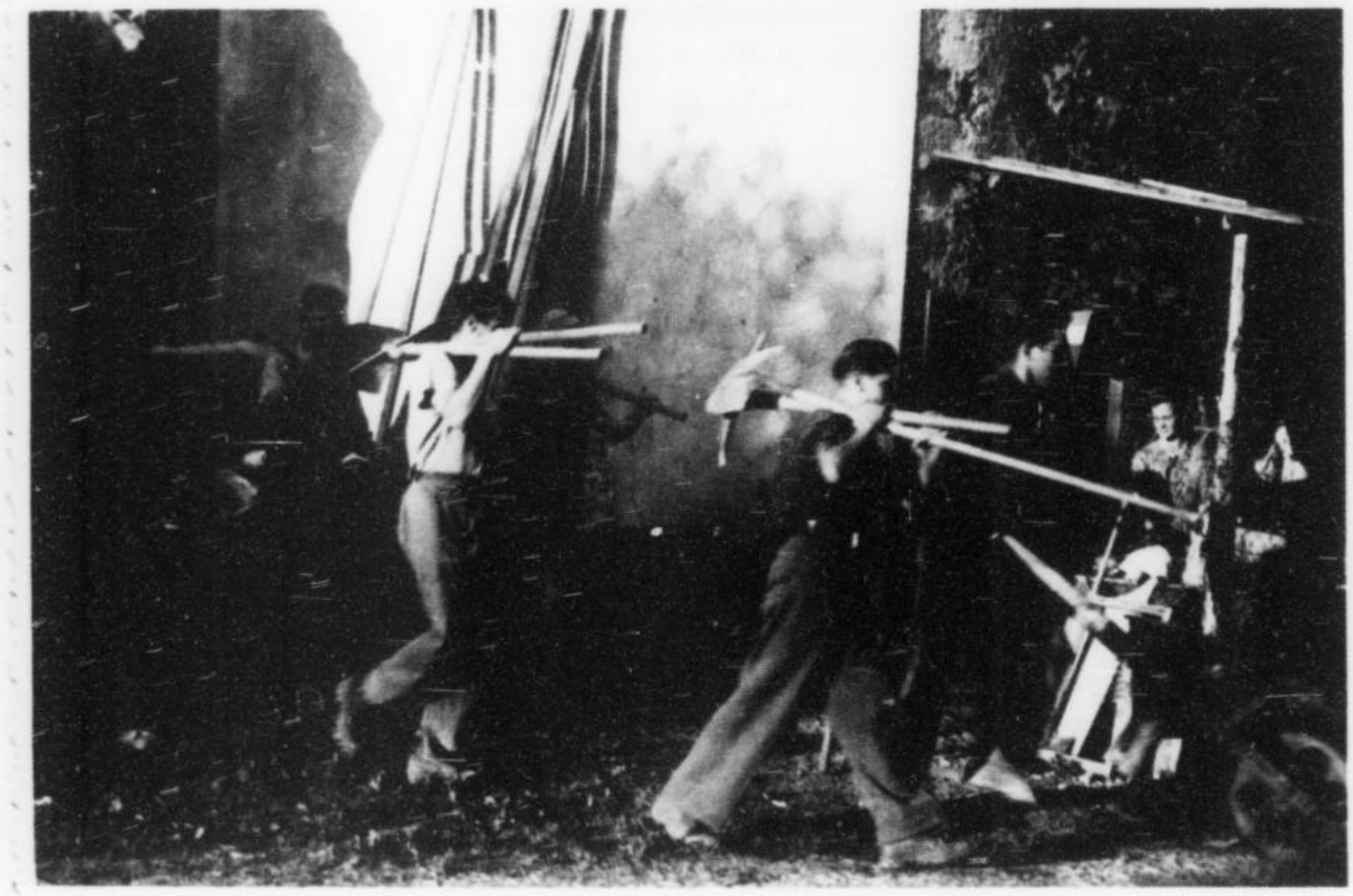
1. A GLOBAL FORCE

From work camps to **virtual aid**

Once closely tied in with community traditions, volunteering's expansion has been driven by an internationalist spirit. Today, it attracts a wide array of enthusiasts, including those on the sidelines

ARTHUR GILLETTE

FORMER SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE, ENDED HIS CAREER AT UNESCO AS DIRECTOR OF THE DIVISION OF YOUTH AND SPORTS ACTIVITIES; AUTHOR OF SEVERAL BOOKS ON VOLUNTEERING



© Service civil international, Paris

In 1945, International Voluntary Service workers rebuilding the French village of Ecurcey.

Sorin Hurdubae, 38, lives in Paris and works several hours a week at Echanges-Solidarités-Territoires. Known by its French play-on-words acronym EST ("East"), this NGO focuses on cooperation with the countries in transition of Eastern Europe—including Sorin's native Romania.

Sorin is but one of several part-time volunteers of different nationalities without whom EST could not survive, much less prosper. His desire to "lend a helping hand" is echoed by millions of people around the world, making volunteering a centrepiece of today's social landscape.

Historically, *not* "to lend a helping hand" would have been an aberration. Virtually all pre-industrial societies had more or less formal communal mutual assistance institutions. Some survived well into the 20th century, others still exist, chiefly in the countryside. In Mali for example, a practice known as *ton* obligated youth to take part in community tasks as part of their rite of passage into adolescence. In Ecuador, the Quichua people continue to organize *mingas*, whereby each household in a community donates labour for a specific local project. In India, the notion of *shramdan*—offering voluntary labour—continues to mobilize people for rural projects, from road building to literacy training. More generally, almost all the world's religions include a dimension of social responsibility towards those in need, a responsibility often intricately linked to salvation or other forms of spiritual advancement.

Friendship after war

In European societies however, good will lost some of its pre-eminence with the industrial revolution, the rise of modern states and the onslaught of money as the main medium of exchange. At the same time, international movements began to emerge, notably the World Alliance of YMCAs, the first international youth NGO, formed in the 1860s. In the U.S., its volunteers proved instrumental in helping immigrant populations from Europe to settle.

After the devastation caused by World War I, coming to the aid of the less fortunate found renewed expression. Volunteering became a more structured endeavour, often seen as a means of building friendship among young people from different European countries. In 1920, the first international voluntary work camp was organized in Esnes, a village near Verdun (France), an area ravaged by the horrible battle that took some one million lives during the war. An initiative of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, the camp helped rebuild farms and other physical infrastructure, and, significantly, included volunteers who had been enemy soldiers in the Great War. It also led to the launching of a still active and creative NGO, Service Civil International (SCI—International Voluntary Service).

Prefiguring North-to-South programmes such as the British Voluntary Service Overseas, the U.S. Peace Corps and the German Deutsche

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Entwicklungsdienst by a quarter of a century, SCI sent the first recorded team of long-term volunteers from what were not yet called "industrialized" to "developing" countries—Europe to India—in 1934. Meanwhile, as economic depression spread, state-run work camp organizations often sprung up in countries as far apart as the U.S. and Bulgaria to give the jobless a chance to learn a skill by volunteering for conservation and physical infrastructure projects.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, national and international teams of volunteers once again contributed much to rebuilding Europe. To cite just one example, many of the stones and bricks that create the charm of today's Old Warsaw were lovingly laid by volunteers from several countries.

But a new world was also in the making, in which volunteering was to play its part. The United Nations was born, with its commitment to promote peace, social progress and understanding between peoples —ideals close in spirit to much volunteering in the inter-war years. In 1948, UNESCO took the lead in involving itself with volunteering by convening the First Conference of Organisers of International Voluntary Workcamps. The gathering created the NGO now known as the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service, which helped to consolidate and expand volunteering worldwide.

The emancipation from colonial rule of many countries led to the birth of a myriad of local voluntary organizations.

The emancipation from colonial rule of many countries in Africa and Asia led to the birth of a myriad of local voluntary service organizations. From Togo to Kenya, from Nigeria to India, countries set up volunteeer work camps chiefly devoted to such tasks as building schools, dispensaries, roads, etc. The emerging nations of the Third World also began to host qualified long-term volunteers from industrialized countries. These schemes were mostly bilateral at the outset, but their success led to the creation three decades ago of the UN Volunteer Programme. UNV is now a multilateral effort with a high proportion of South-South volunteering. Soon after it gained independence from Portugal in the late 1970s, for example, Guinea-Bissau hosted a number of Latin American UNV teachers.

Rusting the Iron Curtain

Some observers are quick to note that volunteering can be kidnapped or abused to serve political agendas—the Hitlerjugend Arbeitsdienst labour brigades in Germany and similar schemes in other totalitarian countries provide some unfortunate illustrations. There have been many other instances, however, when the opposite has been the case. The East-West work camps set up during the Cold War are perhaps the most telling example. These camps (organized by NGOs in the West and party-approved "social organizations" in the East) aimed to promote contact, concrete cooperation and mutual understanding between youth from both sides, with Third World volunteers often present as neutral leavening. Even though small in scale, these initial efforts to rust the Iron Curtain did not, to put it mildly, please all authorities of the conflicting superpowers and their allies, hence their lasting symbolic importance.

Help online

With the advance of globalization, volunteering is entering another age. While work camps set up for specific conservation or physical infrastructure projects still mobilize people, social volunteering (e.g. philanthropic assistance to the homeless) and its cousins, humanitarian volunteering (for example to assist refugees) and advocacy volunteering (for such causes as human rights and fair trade) have come into the spotlight.

A growing trend is that, within and between societies, volunteering is empowering the excluded: disabled people, immigrants, and more generally, those on the margins of society are helping their own. In some instances, it is paving the path to recreating a sense of citizenship: in the U.S. state of Georgia, for example, some 2,000 prison inmates willingly served as volunteer firemen during the year 2000, following training. Online volunteering, sometimes criticized as dehumanizing, offers the potential to involve people who might otherwise be considered unfit to help others. And many recent initiatives show that there is almost no age limit to becoming a volunteer: in Israel, 10 to 13 year-old students are training retired people in computer literacy, while retiree volunteering is also an encouraging trend. The Association of Senior European Counsellors reports, for instance, a network of 15 member bodies in 11 European Union countries, totalling over 9,000 volunteer consultants.

Such retiree volunteering is a personal concern. I ended my UNESCO career in April 1998. Since, I've undertaken a number of volunteer assignments for the UNV and various NGOs, notably in Azerbaijan, Hungary, Palestine and Romania. With due modesty, I hope I have contributed to a variety of projects there, from recycling of household trash in Greater Budapest to job creation for the young unemployed in Brasov. All have brought me invigorating experiences, unexpected learning, even delight. Although unpaid, volunteering can offer unique non-material remuneration. That is one reason why I expect that, when he retires in about another quarter century, Sorin Hurdubae will continue to "lend a helping hand." ■

What volunteers bring is the human touch, the individual, caring approach that no government programme, however well-meaning and well-executed, can deliver.

Edward James Olmos, American actor (1947-)

ROLL UP YO

The online way

Surfing the United Nations web site one night, Nigeria Adedoyin Onasanya's attention was drawn to the slogan of Netaid.org: online action against absolute poverty. "There was a list of projects in which interested people could work, and without ever having to leave home!," he recalls. After enrolling and answering some basic questions about his skills, experience and areas of interest, Onasanya became an online volunteer. Among his most noteworthy achievements has been the creation of an e-discussion group for Nigerian development practitioners. He has also worked for the Horizon Communication project, which investigates, documents and catalogues successful initiatives aimed at combating poverty and under-development.

Netaid.org was born two years ago through the joint effort of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Cisco Systems, a world leader in Internet technology. Its novelty rests in the way it has exploited information technology by tailoring it to the limitations as much as to the wishes of all those people who want to join in "voluntary work that is not physical, but online," as the Filipino Chere Castaneda puts it. Though financial donations are willingly accepted in a click of the mouse, the most novel feature of the organization is the way it joins together people willing to offer their time and talents with those who need specific help in developing a project. And it doesn't matter where in the world the sides are living.

To take one example, Joanne K. Morse—a professor at the University of Hampton, Virginia, and author of science fiction novels—wrote a bilingual dictionary for children in rural areas of Ghana. Designing web pages is another activity: Jade O'Hanlon, from Britain, created a programme to assist children in Sri Lanka called Help for the Children, while Ana Carvalho from Portugal did the same for an urban project in the Philippines, the Rejoice Urban Development Project. Peter van der Zee from Holland, meanwhile, helped translate documents from English into German.

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Netaid.org is based on the principle that there are many initiatives, small or large, which can bring about major changes in the fight against poverty. All that is needed are a screen, a keyboard, and the will to help. ■

A.L.

More information:
www.netaid.org

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UR SLEEVES

A few tips

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The service encourages volunteering as a means to work for peace, international understanding, solidarity, cooperation and reconciliation between the different peoples of the world. CCIVS' main fields of action are informal education, preservation of cultural heritage and the environment, and emergency aid and reconstruction.

Are you involved in volunteering research?

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To find out more, contact:
The Co-ordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service
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Tel: (00 33) 1 45 68 49 36
e-mail: ccivs@unesco.org
Internet: http://www.unesco.org/cciv

What are the aims of the International Year of Volunteers 2001?

The aims are increasing volunteering's profile, promoting it as activity, making it easier to become a volunteer and improving the exchange of knowledge and experience between volunteers from around the world. The year also offers a unique opportunity to pay homage to the millions of volunteers who each day provide essential help to those who most need it.

For more information, see www.iyv.org

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More information: http://www.unv.org

On the rise:
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2. NEW BONDS

Self-interest or goodwill?

From improving a CV to meeting kindred spirits, volunteers are driven by a myriad of motives. For many, giving a hand is simply a moral obligation, says Spanish social psychologist Fernando Chacón Fuentes*

INTERVIEW BY LUCÍA IGLESIAS KUNTZ

UNESCO COURIER JOURNALIST

Why do people feel the need to volunteer?

It isn't easy to figure out because the desire to volunteer stems from many inner motives that are very hard to discern. The only source of information we have is the actual volunteer. But all the studies that have been done—especially those by two American professors, Allen M. Omoto (University of Kansas) and Mark Snyder (University of Minnesota)—come up with two broad reasons. The main one is a feeling of moral or religious obligation to help solve a problem. These are the altruists. I prefer to call them "hetero-centred," or focused on others. The second group of volunteers are the egotists or "self-centred." They're out to get some benefit for themselves.

But these motives aren't exclusive of each other, are they?

No. There aren't any "pure" volunteers. Nearly all of them are driven by a combination of motives, though one will dominate the others.

Volunteers who hold out the longest in organizations are those who are altruistic, but at the same time recognize that they are benefiting from their work.

What are these motives?

Omoto and Snyder have identified five. The first is belief in a set of values. By volunteering, people express their own personal principles. So if someone thinks of him or herself as a humanitarian kind of person and acts accordingly, they'll feel at ease.

The second, quite broad motive is a quest for knowledge. Some people go to developing countries to gain a different perspective on life, while others merely do so to add to their CV.

The third reason is more utilitarian: volunteering is a means to an end, often driven by the wish to meet others, especially kindred spirits.

The fourth group of motives is what we call identification with the community. This is when someone identifies with a specific group or problem and makes a commitment to it by becoming actively involved. These are the volunteers you'll find in causes such as the mentally ill, cancer or AIDS. Some people clearly join the fight against AIDS as a way of acknowledging rights and above all identifying with those groups which are hardest hit by the epidemic.

The last group of motives, much rarer and harder to explain, is what psychologists call self-defence. When someone is very afraid or anxious, they sometimes become a volunteer as a way of confronting their fear. An example is the homosexual who gets involved in the battle against AIDS. It can also be a way to cope with more general fears and anxieties, and some of my colleagues encourage their patients to get involved in voluntary activity to take their mind off their own problems. But I don't really approve of that.

Why not?

Because I think voluntary projects should help the people targeted by such programmes. They aren't there to help the volunteers themselves.

Who volunteers most, women or men?

Neither differ much in their reasons for volunteering, though more women volunteer than men, especially in social work and health. You'll also find more men in civil protection organizations. Whether we like it or not, this has a lot to do with traditional roles—women tend to be the carers while men put out fires and deal with disasters.

Are volunteers different from place to place?

I don't know of any transcultural study about that, but national surveys suggest a few differences. In Eastern societies, such as Japan, people work more for groups and for the community. They talk more about the interests of a group and having a sense of duty. In Western societies, especially Anglo-Saxon ones, people act in more individualistic ways.

Societies have always had their own mechanisms for dealing with social needs unmet by the state. Before, families took care of their elders. These natural networks are breaking down and creating exclusion. In this sense, volunteering will always have an important role to play.

** Professor of Social Psychology at Madrid's Alcalá de Henares University and president of the Official College of Psychologists in Madrid.*

2001

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Teens talking to **teens**

By starting a hotline, some 50 Slovenian teenagers have become pros at listening, conversing and gently settling everyday hassles

INGRIG MAGER

JOURNALIST AT THE SLOVENIAN DAILY *DNEVNIK*

The phone rings, startling two high school students, Tina and Jana. "I'll get it!" says Jana. "This is 'Teens Talking to Teens'..." We're in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, at the Youth Counselling Centre, which began a hotline for troubled teens in 1993. What's so original about this self-financing project? The people answering the phones aren't experts but 14 to 18 year-olds. Pairs of them are on duty every day from three to five in the afternoon, except weekends and vacations. At first, they were teenagers from the neighbourhood. Then their schoolmates and friends of friends started pitching in. Today, they number about 50.

"Everybody knows our phone number," says Nina. "It's posted in the schools. Most callers are high school students. Some of them think we'll do their math homework." But that's not what the hotline is there for. "Mothers call us too," says Daniel, "when they have reasons to think their children are taking drugs. We've got a good file of special institutions we can refer them to. And when the situation looks serious, we transfer the call to the professional staff." The volunteers have been duly advised that drugs are a matter for experts.

Ales says the best thing about the hotline is that it gives teenagers a chance to speak freely about school, parents and sex. "It's different from going to shrinks, which can be awkward and boring sometimes."

Adults, including centre director Ljubo Raicevic, psychologist Natasa Fabjan and educator Lili Raicevic, keep a low profile. Their role is limited to training and supervising the volunteers. Answering the questions is not always easy. "Sometimes you feel powerless," says Andreja. "If somebody calls several times, you eventually figure out what's really bothering them. But most people call just once, and you wonder whether you said the right thing." Nejc adds, "The best ideas always occur to you after hanging up! So, we tell ourselves that the main thing is to talk, if only to take the caller's mind off his or her dark thoughts."

Why do these young people spend hours on the phone with strangers? Maja, who is still a minor, has already been listening and counselling for three years. "The high school sent me here," she says. "They told me I was too talkative, and thought that talking on the phone would do me good. I've met lots of nice people here. We train together and go out together. We've all become friends."

The young volunteers are devoted to helping others, but they also get something out of the experience. For some, the hotline is a means to keep loneliness at bay. Others satisfy their need for freedom and self-assertion. "They're emerging from childhood and want to take on responsibilities, but people often tell them they're too young. Here, they're taken seriously. Volunteering gives them a chance to make the transition between playing and working," says the centre's director, an educator and psychotherapist by training .

"They're emerging from childhood and want to take on responsibilities, but people often tell them they're too young."

The volunteers say that since they've started "talking to teens," they have become aware of other people's woes and can settle their own more easily. For example, Stela, who joined the group when she was 13, eventually shared her problems —a serious conflict with her parents—with her new friends.

The professional staff members have also had to work on themselves and mature at the same time as the teens. "The idea came from them," says Raicevic. "At first, we were reluctant because they were stepping into an area traditionally reserved for professionals and adults. But we told ourselves that without young people, their influence and ideas, we could never succeed. Why not let them take part in making decisions and get involved?" The 8,000 or so phone calls received since the hotline opened in 1993 proves they can. ■

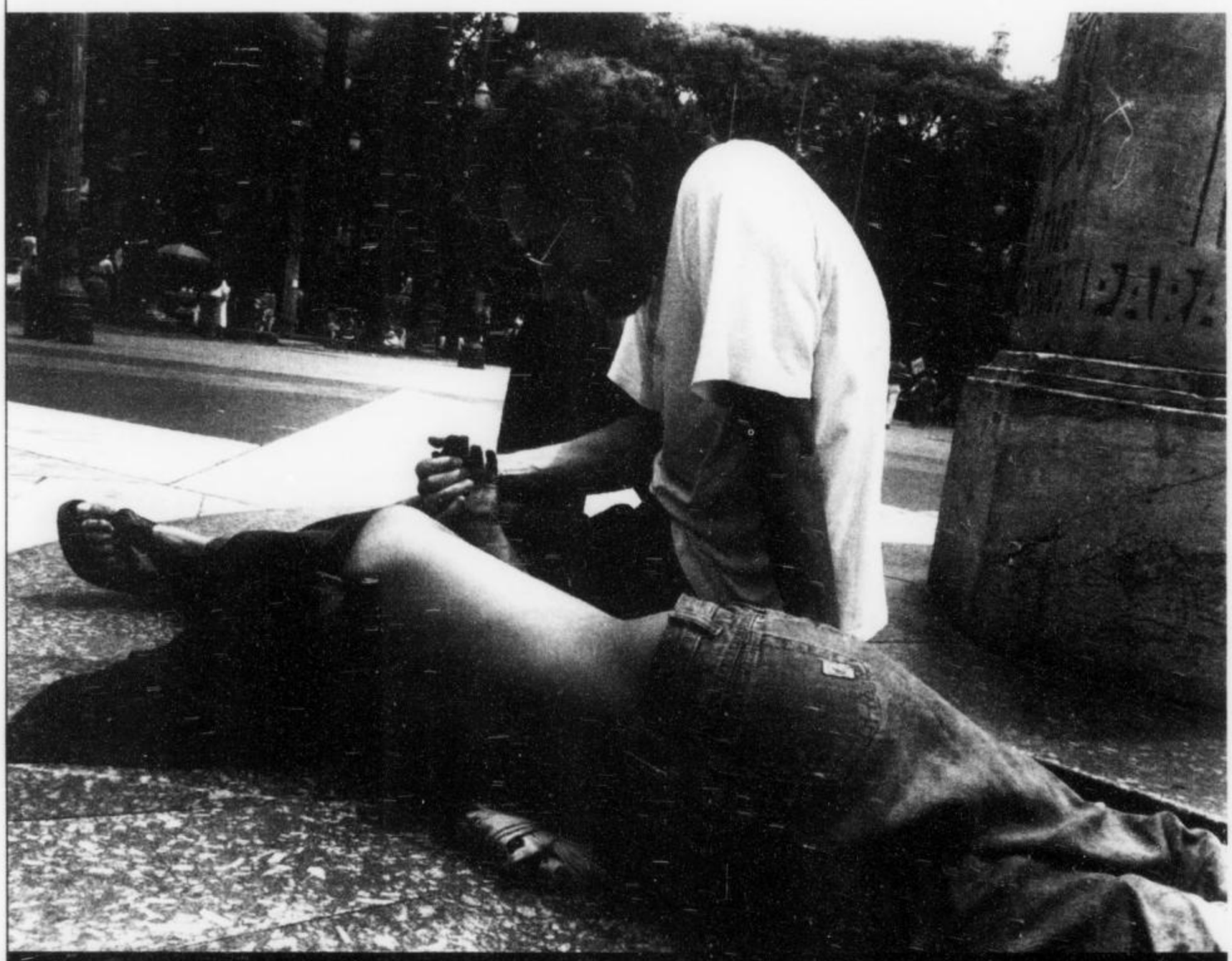
© www.z-misss.si

Slovenian Youth Counselling Centre: www.z-misss.si

2. NEW BONDS

Brazil: taking up the **social slack**

The crisis of the state and the limits of the free market have fuelled a boom in voluntary work, in which business is taking a lead



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Reaching out to street children in Brazil.

JAYME BRENER

BRAZILIAN JOURNALIST

"Do your bit" is the slogan of a major radio campaign by the Brazilian Organizing Committee for the International Year of Volunteers 2001. The simple and blunt slogan is emblematic of a trend that has been changing Brazilian society in recent years—the boom in voluntary work.

A nationwide survey in 1998 by the Institute for Studies in Religion (ISER) in Rio de Janeiro showed that 22.6 percent of Brazil's adult population—or 13.9 million people—did some kind of unpaid social work, and that 13.9 percent of them belonged to a community association. These figures are far behind the 49 percent of U.S. citizens who do voluntary work, but they reflect a remarkable development in Brazilian society, which has traditionally been polarized between the state and the private sector, with little room in between for community involvement.

"The growth of voluntary activity is largely because our institutions are going through a serious crisis," says the president of the São Paulo city council, José Eduardo Cardozo, who was elected last year with strong support from civic awareness groups.

Leilah Landim, a researcher from ISER, argues that the growing number of volunteers in Brazil is changing the nature of social work, which for the first three centuries of European colonization was the almost exclusive domain of the Catholic Church.

Social networks instead of crime

But the triumph of free-market economics, the decline of trade unions, the state's faltering ability to invest and the dizzying growth of problems such as urban violence, drug trafficking, AIDS and teenage pregnancies, have paved the way for the construction of new social networks based on voluntary work and goodwill initiatives by business.

"Millions of people, many of them wealthy, have realized that poverty can lead to drug dealing that could threaten their own children," says Gilson Schwartz, of the University of São Paulo's Institute of Advanced Studies. "Many business people

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now understand that supporting professional training programmes is the way to get children off the street, where they might otherwise fall into a life of crime that could threaten their businesses."

One of the features of this boom in voluntary work in Brazil is the attempt to go beyond simple handouts. Ruth Cardoso, the anthropologist wife of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, is the driving force behind the Community Solidarity Programme. She launched the Volunteers' Project at the end of 1997 with the stated aim of improving on traditional populist schemes. The project's charter declares that it is urgent to "establish a modern culture of voluntary work based on trained volunteers and making services work."

Bankers on the literacy trail

The charter also says, with a touch of irony, that "the new vision of voluntary work has nothing to do with charity or providing bored people with things to do."

In the last five years, voluntary work has enabled Community Solidarity to give vocational training to 87,000 young people between 16 and 21 reckoned to be "at risk of social exclusion."

But perhaps the most original feature of this growth in voluntary work is occurring inside companies. A recent survey among 100 of the 380 firms affiliated to the Ethos Institute, which promotes business ethics, showed that 94 percent of them had their own voluntary projects.

The state-owned Bank of Brazil's "Read, Write and Liberate" programme, for example, involves more than 2,100 of its employees in voluntary efforts to promote literacy and encourage people all over the country to read. The programme has already taught more than 31,000 people to read and write, and one of its most recent successes was to teach these skills to 220 inhabitants of a small Amazonian village, Belém do Alto Solimões.

Meanwhile, the Dutch multinational clothing firm C & A says 20 percent of its Brazilian employees—equivalent to 1,400 people—are doing voluntary work. The cosmetics group Natura has assembled a group of storytellers who go around the country entertaining thousands of people in schools, hospitals and other social institutions. Through the "Children Are Life" programme, 84 volunteers from the Schering-Plough laboratory have taught basic principles of health and hygiene to more than 25,000 children since 1998.

Non-toxic glue

At the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing plant at Sumaré, about 120 kilometres from São Paulo, 80 percent of the 2,600 employees take part in voluntary work. Staff from the Brazilian subsidiary of the U.S. security firm Chubb set aside one day a year to teach children from poor areas about what they do. The 95 branches of the local subsidiary of the U.S. shoe firm Heel Sew Quick (HSQ) are helping to fund a school for young shoemakers in São Paulo, and have also developed a non-toxic glue that will be used by HSQ in all its overseas factories. Shoemakers' glue is widely used as a drug by street children in Brazil's major cities.

"The social awareness of Brazilians has clearly grown," says Dr Walmir Frare, who runs Bit Company, one of the country's biggest networks of computer training schools. "The idea that private firms should help to reduce social inequalities has really caught on, and a big part of that is supporting voluntary work by their employees." Bit Company is involved in training teachers and students, and has an experimental project to teach elderly people how to use computers.

Many voluntary programmes start out as fairly personal or informal schemes. Human resources expert Gilmar Bernardi, who works for the French telecommunications giant Alcatel in São Paulo, decided 10 years ago to fund the creation of a nursery for working mothers in a church on the edge of the city. Today there are three, one of them in a *favela*, or slum area.

Powerful alliances

While social work spreads throughout Brazilian civil society, it must still be stressed that religious organizations continue to play a major part in voluntary action, particularly among the very poor.

Lastly, the rapid expansion of the Internet in Brazil is giving a powerful boost to voluntary activity. At first, charities found it an excellent way to raise money and disseminate their ideas. Nowadays, its main contribution to voluntary social work is perhaps through education. Many projects use it to enable students and teachers to help deprived students throughout the country.

Perhaps the most ambitious programme is the City of Knowledge, run by São Paulo University's Institute for Advanced Studies and the Education Faculty Foundation, backed by the media (the newspapers *Gazeta Mercantil*, *Folha de São Paulo* and *O Estado de São Paulo*), big companies such as IBM, Banco Santander and Boston Bank, and the publishing houses Moderna and Pangea. The project involves permanent voluntary in-firm training of instructors, teachers and students. ■

Volunteers Portal (www.portaldovoluntario.org.br) describes examples of social work and suggests ways businesses can get involved. The site has had more than a million and a half visitors in its first four months online.

When a man is willing and passionate, the gods are with him.

Aeschylus, Greek dramatist (525-426 B.C.)

2. NEW BONDS

A **tornado** on wheels

Neither poverty nor polio can slow down Carmen Reyes Zubiaga, who has thrown herself into the cause of the disabled from the Philippines to Cambodia

CARLO M. TADIAR

MANILA-BASED JOURNALIST

Paralyzed by polio at the age of a year-and-a-half in exceedingly poor circumstances, Carmen Reyes Zubiaga has spent a lifetime battling the odds. Today, she is the chief of several organizations and the leading light in her country for the movement seeking to uplift the plight of those who, like her, have been shorn of a normal physical life.

Born the sixth of nine children of a carpenter and laundry woman, Carmen has lived most of her life in Taytay, Rizal, a municipality at the edge of the sprawling national capital of the Philippines, Metro Manila. Navigating the winding, narrow streets of Taytay requires great dexterity while dodging a torrent of traffic and people. But Carmen is a master of this labyrinth. On the day of our meeting, she beat me to the place of assignation by an embarrassing 20 minutes, despite my two fully operational legs and four automobile wheels. Carmen arrived via tricycle, the motorized pedicab that is a popular mode of public transport.

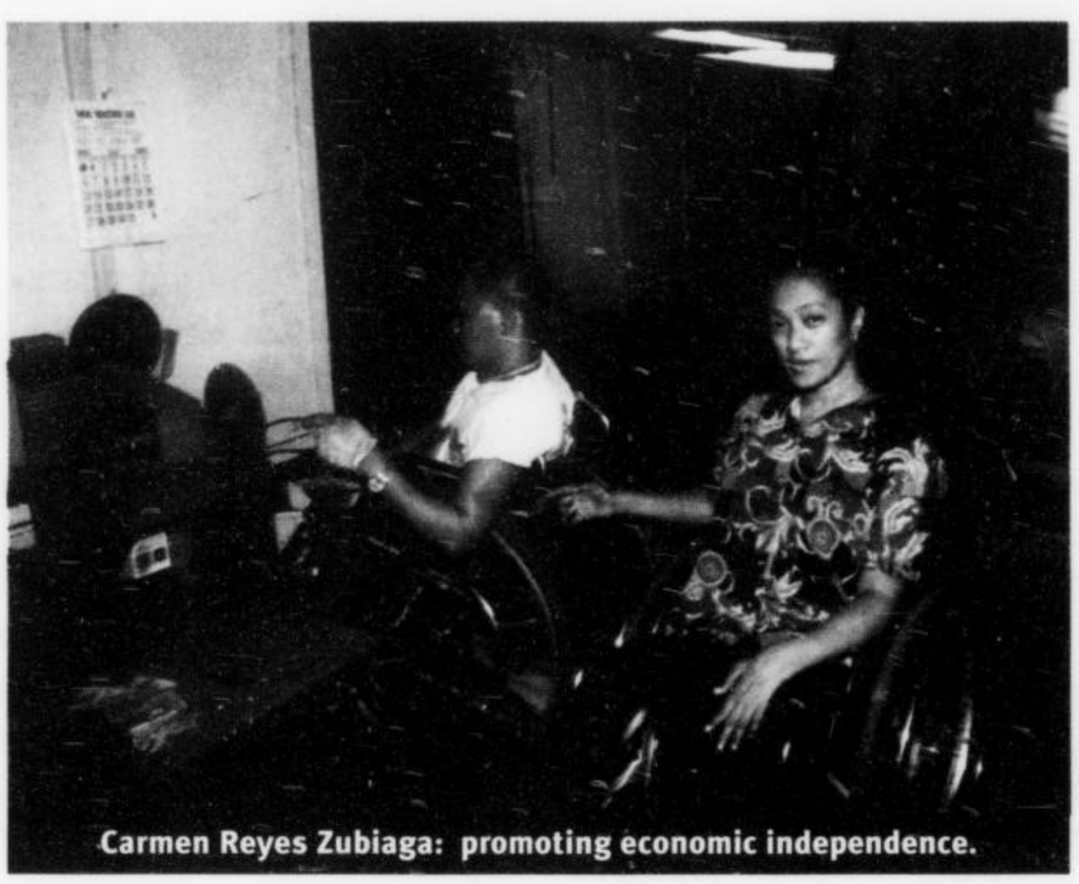
Campus activist

I miss her the first time I survey the restaurant, because I fail to see the wheelchair and the woman who turns out to be Carmen Reyes Zubiaga seems far too young for someone so accomplished. She has set up three organizations and a foundation—all dedicated to supporting the disabled through micro-credit programmes, scholarships, and other forms of assistance. Not only did she create these groups, but she also devotes virtually all of her time to them without financial compensation.

This remarkably pretty and gentle person contrasts with the steely and authoritarian persona she exudes by voice over the telephone. A strong vocal command is clearly essential to impose her will in a society that customarily downplays individual volition. "My mother said I was very hard-headed as a child," she laughs. "I didn't even know what a wheelchair looked like," she says, recalling her childhood and early adolescence spent crawling on the floor because her family couldn't afford a wheelchair. At the age of 14, she took the initiative to write to a ladies' club asking for support, which they readily supplied. While her parents were unable to offer much materially, they were generous in their support. "They never treated me as a special person," she says, which meant, "in my family, I never experienced any discrimination."

Poverty also forced her to stop temporarily her education after elementary school. But ten years later, Carmen resumed her studies through the assistance of a Belgian missionary, Sister Valeriana Baerts, and the institute she founded, *Tahanang Walang Hagdanan* (House Without Stairs), which is now the country's foremost agency advancing the plight of the disabled.

Though many scoffed at her for daring to enter college, Carmen rose to the top of her class while contributing to comic books to help pay for her studies. Struck by the number of wheelchair-bound students (around 10), she launched her first volunteer project to raise funds to construct ramps for wheelchair access around campus.



Carmen Reyes Zubiaga: promoting economic independence.

© Gil Nartea

Tahanang proved to be Carmen's well-spring—not only did she work as a volunteer throughout her student days, but after graduating, she took up the roles of public relations executive and project developer for nine years. This experience enabled her to hone her skills in organizing, marketing, fund-raising and networking. It was also at Tahanang that she met her husband, who is not disabled.

After Tahanang, she offered her services to the United Nations Development Program, which sent her to Cambodia to launch the first government

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endeavour—a semi-autonomous agency—to deal with its teeming numbers of disabled, a legacy of the bitter civil war.

Even though conditions are worse there than they are in the Philippines, she says, the centre managed to set up employment opportunities for the disabled. But her greatest fulfilment lay in setting an example for Cambodians with disability, who, she says, formerly had a single destiny—begging.

Business from home

"When I would go to the market in Cambodia, I'd be regarded differently," she says, "because I was buying, not begging. So for Cambodian people, I painted a different picture of the disabled."

The disabled in Cambodia had previously been reduced to the most abject status, robbed of any hope of happiness, love, marriage, and children. She, on the other hand, had crossed an ocean to go to Cambodia and had brought along her husband and two children. When she returned to the Philippines after three years, a third child was added to her brood, a girl entrusted to her parentage by a very poor Cambodian couple.

Back home in the Philippines, she set up three organizations and a foundation to help people with handicaps pursue an education, learn new skills and start their own businesses. The organizations clearly reject the charity of the missionaries. Instead, they promote self-assurance and economic independence. "You have to create wealth before it can be distributed," says Carmen. So for example, to fund educational scholarships, her foundation is running a cooperative grocery aimed at becoming a chain.

Employment is very difficult to come by for the disabled. Not only are they the last to be considered for any position, but commuting between work and home is also extremely arduous. "That's why we're promoting micro-entrepreneurship and giving out loans, so the disabled can set up their own businesses in their own homes," she says.

The organizations also stress a principle close to Carmen's heart: the virtue of volunteer work. "I am the beneficiary of other people's goodwill," she underscores. "If not for a volunteer who brought me to the National Orthopaedic Hospital, I would not have met Sister Valeriana Baerts....No matter who you are, if you don't know how to share, you'll get nowhere." ■

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2. NEW BONDS

Starting over at the ashram

In southern India, women who once fled their homes with nothing in hand are now helping others to earn a living and playing a role in health and education programmes

SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN

ASSISTANT EDITOR, *DECCAN HERALD*, BANGALORE

Susheelamma, the founder.

© PAVAN

It all began with one woman's dream to help those in the same situation as herself: poor, uneducated and in urgent need of a safe haven.

In 1975, Susheelamma found herself with two children to support and a broken marriage. The daughter of a weaver, her education was cut short because her family couldn't afford secondary school fees. Today, she is at the head of the Sumangali Seva Ashram in Bangalore, staffed by a dedicated team of 450 full-time volunteers. Day after day, the ashram offers destitute women who come knocking at its door a roof over their heads and a chance to get a new start in life by learning a skill. Once they can stand on their own feet, the women are free to look for jobs outside the ashram, or to work with its myriad projects for a small stipend and two square meals a day. Many of them have never forgotten the hope it provided, and continue to contribute to the ashram's smooth running in some form or other.

It is a gaping vacuum in social services that prompted Susheelamma and a group of friends to found the ashram in 1975. At the time, they managed to convince the state government to allot them a plot of land to build a small shelter and a school to educate destitute women. But the land had a deep open pit on it, and filling it was beyond their financial reach. Slowly but surely, Susheelamma and her friends convinced people to donate to their cause, and eventually a school shed was built.

"We did not have the money to buy books for children or to feed the women who had arrived at the ashram to stay," says Susheelamma, a petite and frail 65 year-old who continues to preside tirelessly over the ashram's activities. She and the other volunteers would work all night to make little trinkets, which they sold to raise meagre sums of money. When she started the ashram, she was earning a mere 170 rupees a month (around $4) from her work as a warden and a nursery

An ashram volunteer advising a woman about health issues in Shaktinagar.

© PAVAN

school teacher. Of this, she used Rs100 to maintain her family, and the rest to launch the ashram's programmes. "Some volunteers, like Parvatamma [who is a member of the ashram's core committee, and more fortunate], would hand over their entire monthly salary cheques to us," recalls Susheelamma.

The ashram's first income-generation scheme involved cutting and twisting wires into a U-shape to be sold as metal poultry feeders. One kilogram of these would fetch 40 paise (less than a cent), but drop by drop, they had enough to make ends meet. Then they made garlands of silk cocoons. Volunteers would carry sacks of them on their backs in the overcrowded state transport buses to deliver them to stores across the city.

Lifelong loyalty

Today, the ashram receives grants from the government as well as financial and material assistance from international aid agencies, along with individual donations. Its real asset, however, are the volunteers: from the outset, the ashram was based on the principle of recruiting those who once benefited from its services. Committed to improving the lives of their less fortunate sisters, the volunteers run education and training programmes, provide counselling to women in distress (who may not need shelter) and conduct regular adult literacy programmes, health check-ups and immunization campaigns. The ashram also runs two primary schools, 130 *anganwadi* (or childcare) centres, which provide supplementary nutrition to children, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers in slums, 25 crèches, and 19 non-formal schools, also in slums.

People like Shantamma make this whole endeavour possible. One of the pillars of the ashram, she trains volunteers and is a source of strength and guidance to all those around her. The unassuming lady vividly recalls the day, 25 years ago, when she and her two infant children came here, seeking shelter. Her eyes still moisten as she recounts how uncertain the future seemed after walking away from an alcoholic husband who beat her in front of the children and brought another woman to live with them. Uneducated and unemployed, she had no idea how she would fend for herself and the children. Then someone told her about the ashram, which willingly accepted her. Initially, Shantamma worked only in the kitchen; then she took care of the children in the ashram's crèche. Meanwhile, she followed a literacy course offered by the ashram. Then she was trained by other volunteers to become a health worker, advising women in villages on nutrition and immunisation.

Adopting a shanty town

Today, Shantamma lives in her own house but comes to the ashram every day to help in the kitchen and train other women to participate in income-generation projects. "I lived in the ashram for seven years," Shantamma says. "It gave me *ashreya* (shelter) when nobody else wanted me. I can never forget that.... I will help others who come here as long as I can."

The atmosphere at the ashram is tranquil, if business-like. Residents rise before dawn and after meditation and a spartan breakfast, they set out to work. Although they are not obliged to, just about all of them, including those with mental and physical disabilities, volunteer to help. This willingness has been the mainstay of the ashram from the outset.

In addition to full-time volunteers, many others from the community at large give some of their time. Shakuntala, an engineer in a government department, spends a few hours each weekend helping with odd jobs, affirming that it makes her feel more worthwhile. Some contribute through active service, others through financial donations. Philanthropy is well-entrenched in Indian philosophy; volunteers are convinced that they must help others in order to enjoy prosperity and peace of mind.

Many of the ashram's women now volunteer in the nearby Kuprajbande slum, which was so run-down that the ashram decided to "adopt" it and improve the lives of its inhabitants. Fifty-six shanty dwellings were rebuilt by volunteers, and awareness campaigns launched on health sanitation and against alcoholism. Today, the slum has been renamed Shaktinagar—the City of Strength. Volunteers claim their drive against alcoholism has been so effective that almost 80 percent of the men (the women rarely drink) have become teetotallers.

Susheelamma's story is proof of how individuals with no means, but plenty of courage and determination, can bring about lasting change. "There's still a lot to be achieved," she muses. "What we have done is but a drop in a vast ocean of need." ■

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2. NEW BONDS

Mixing **sweat** with **earth**

South African university students are flocking to the country's main volunteering organization with the promise of fun, manual labour and a radical change in African politics

REHANA ROSSOUW

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It may not be everyone's idea of a perfect holiday, but France Montwedi had the adventure of his life. From South Africa, the student of natural sciences took a bus to Maputo, capital of Mozambique. With 11 other volunteers, he was then led to a nearby village, deserted since last year's floods, and given his tasks: mixing mortar, learning Portuguese, swatting mosquitoes and reconstructing the community's school building.

Set up in 1993 under the auspices of the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, the Southern African Student Volunteers Organization (SASVO) has become a pioneering body for community action across the region. Working in poverty-stricken areas, the organization has sent out groups of students to spend part of their vacations on projects and fill some of the gaps left by under-resourced governments.

But the organization is not just about good works, as Montwedi's experience goes to prove. "We get a lot of students participating—mainly black students who'd otherwise have to stay at home over the summer because they are not so wealthy. For them it's an enormously beneficial experience to go and work in rural areas of southern Africa," explains Jan Bezuidenhout, SASVO's deputy co-ordinator.

For Christoff Heyns, a founding member and director of the Centre for Human Rights, the initiative is a crucial step towards reaffirming young people's African identity and sense of belonging. "I believe that if you mix sweat with earth, you get ownership of that land. And if you mix sweat with the sweat of others, you get joint ownership."

His hope is that SASVO may one day lay the groundwork for a pan-continental volunteering body. "If there is a problem in Rwanda or Mozambique, the first people to arrive to offer assistance should be Africans," he says.

From building to counselling

So far, however, SASVO is the only indigenous South African organization promoting voluntary action among university students and young people in rural and disadvantaged communities. To date, more than 6,000 student volunteers from 40 academic institutions in 10 African countries have undertaken participatory community development projects in South Africa, Swaziland, Mozambique, Botswana, Tanzania, Uganda and Namibia.

Although South African youth have a proud history of activism—they were at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid—Heyns says voluntary action is a different challenge. "Activism is primarily focused on political issues. While voluntarism doesn't exclude this, it includes non-political activities like working in a hospice or educating people about issues like AIDS."

Since 1996, the organization's primary focus has been on schools: they have renovated over 40, built some 214 classrooms, and painted more than 800 others as well as four children's hospital wards. But student volunteers have also built houses, community centres and sports fields, and planted vegetable gardens and trees. They have done disaster relief work, run human rights education workshops, assisted with the general elections in South Africa and taken statements for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Future projects are expected to focus more on HIV/AIDS awareness, counselling and agricultural projects

© Jan Bezuidenhout/SASVO

SASVO volunteers repair a school in Mozambique damaged by floods.

In the opinion of its organizers, SASVO's greatest accomplishment has been to instil in volunteers and ▶

community members alike ideals of self-reliance, self-help, voluntarism and love of Africa through projects that help to secure access to education and services for all—access that would otherwise be impossible to guarantee. As Bezuidenhout sees it, the volunteers' experiences may as a result prove critical in beginning to bridge the divide that has traditionally separated Africa's political elite from those who are ruled.

"The problem in Africa had always been that once people get to power, they loose contact with those they were meant to serve. But volunteers will always remember their time working in a rural community," he explains.

Bridging the class divide

Projects have indeed been marked by stronger links between the organizers and the communities they are seeking to serve. "At first, our volunteers would arrive in communities and commence with the work that needed doing. Nowadays, by the time our volunteers arrive, the community already has the materials and the plans. They have ownership of their projects and we provide the sweat," Heyns says.

Meanwhile, adds Bezuidenhout, village people and volunteers—some of whom are likely to become political and business leaders in the decades to come—have time and the opportunity during their work to debate issues of pressing concern. "They talk about human rights issues or about gender issues. It creates links between illiterate and semi-literate people, and university students who might themselves have grown up in such villages."

In 1997, SASVO made its first move towards collaborative ventures and piloted its Operation Zenzele ("Do it yourself") Project. This focused more specifically on upgrading, renovation and repair of the socio-economic infrastructure (particularly of schools) in disadvantaged communities in conjunction with township youth and secondary school learners. Advice on which communities to target within South Africa often comes from the government, whose ministries work closely with the organization.

In addition, SASVO offers longer-term opportunities for graduates to work in development projects where they can gain experience and practical skills in their field of study or interest. Volunteers also have the option of working for NGOs and international agencies. More than 19 long-term placements have been made.

With branches at seven universities in southern Africa, there is no shortage of students waiting to enrol. "We have so many people applying for our projects that we do not see the necessity of building a large infrastructure," says SASVO project coordinator Belinda Mogashwa. "We would prefer not to spend money on management and offices; instead we want to plough in money and resources where they are needed most: in destitute communities." ■

2. NEW BONDS

The **mending hands** of youthful elders

In Great Britain, thousands of retired men gain a new lease on life by refurbishing rusted tools and dispatching them to craftsmen in Africa. A personal account of this ongoing adventure

GLYN ROBERTS

FOUNDER OF TOOLS FOR SELF-RELIANCE, HAMPSHIRE, UK (WWW.TFSR.ORG)

We started Tools for Self-Reliance in 1979 with a handful of volunteers, based on the simple idea of collecting and sending refurbished tools to village workshops in Africa. My interest in tools grew alongside a rising disenchantment with big technical projects overseas. I'd seen foreign companies in West Africa make huge profits in the name of development. Expatriate staff who were supposed to make a difference enjoyed huge salaries, servants and extravagant perks, all adding to Third World debt. Much of this assistance seemed to inhibit the ordinary working people from taking initiatives to better their lives.

In Ethiopia, I'd observed costly Caterpillar diggers brought in by aid agencies rusting away, because it was impossible to find diesel or spare parts for them. Meanwhile, thousands of Ethiopians went unemployed and hungry. Surely there was a way to do things differently.

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Then, one day, hearing an aid worker in Uganda complain that young people were stealing the tools from his visual aid display, it struck me that tools could empower these poor people and give them a livelihood. Visits to local craftsmen showed their equipment was almost worn out, chisels sharpened to the last centimetre, hammers mere stumps of iron. I was sure there was scope for an organization which could assist them while avoiding traditional debt traps.

The first steps

Back home, the idea crystallized further. My mother pointed out that in our street alone, there lived dozens of people with tools from a lifetime stacked in their sheds. What did this mean, in terms of the unused hammers, saws, and sewing machines that could be collected all over Britain?

We got to work with a bunch of dedicated student volunteers from the Polytechnic in 1979, using an abandoned church hall in Portsmouth as our first tool shed. There was no heating, no water, no gas, no furniture, but we were jubilant. We had found somewhere to clean the first batch of 240 tools collected from houses in the Kingston prison area.

Today, tools worth more than £500,000 ($800,000) each year are shipped to partner organizations in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Ghana. Working closely with these groups, TFSR is able to deliver targeted aid to groups of craftsmen in poor communities. We also promote local tool production by supporting blacksmith training programmes in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Sierra Leone. Rural blacksmiths use our heavy-duty equipment to make and mend tools locally, producing far more than we could ever ship out.

Without its large core of dedicated volunteers, TSFR would not exist. When we started out, we had never considered what secondary benefits this scheme might bring, especially for retired men, who are often reluctant to get out and socialize—often to the despair of their wives. Thousands of them have got a new lease on life by volunteering with us—today, older men make up about half the membership of our 70 groups. Once a week, up and down the country, they get together to de-rust, mend, sharpen, oil and finally pack the tools, as good as new (and sometimes better because steel in old tools is often of superb quality) for dispatch to Africa.

Talking tools in Tanzania

Some of these volunteers once earned their living as mechanics, engineers or builders, and they take great pride in teaching their skills to younger members. "What they have in common," says Tony Care, coordinator of TSFR, Wales, "is their high standard of workmanship. They are methodical and thorough. They enjoy taking on a complicated job and refuse to be beaten by it. They're a mine of useful information and a constant source of funny stories from the past." It can be a time for nostalgia too. Now and then, a volunteer will pick up a rusting instrument and exclaim, "I haven't seen one of these since World War II!"

However, it's not just the practical aspect of the job that attracts our volunteers. Most come because they appreciate the underlying spirit of the organization, and sharing experiences with others. "TSFR is infinitely worthwhile," declares John Watley, our 84 year-old sewing-machine guru who was once the town clerk in Andover, Hampshire. "It's the most original and in the best sense, 'revolutionary' relief work I've ever come across." In Doncaster, Derek Taylor, 72, shares his reason for volunteering. "Our son was killed in a road accident," he explains. "My wife and I started to think of our own lives. Before, our family was the only thing that mattered. Now, we are outward-looking; everyone is our family. Some of our volunteers illustrate how it's never too late to make a difference. Kevin Petrie, 85, spent his working life as a bookkeeper and teacher, and only started collecting and refurbishing tools at 70. Over the last 15 years, he has refurbished 11,500 beautiful tools, mainly for carpentry. A member of the TSFR board of trustees, he visited Tanzania, at his own expense, to see the equipment in use. The country's former president, Julius K. Nyerere, who was a TSFR patron, invited him home to discuss the role of tools and artisans in development. Later, as Kevin travelled around villages to broaden his education, his enthusiasm was so evident that he was christened *Mzee kijana*, or youthful elder.

When I asked Kevin's wife, Ruth, how she felt about the thousands of hours he had spent closeted in the garage, she smiled. "He's been happy doing those tools," she mused. "I see it as our small contribution to help the world along." ■

© Tony Care, United Kingdom

Kevin Petrie on the job in his garage workshop.

An "**associational**" revolution

The powers of free markets and states are often said to have spelt the end for civil society. Not so, argues the author: the non-profit sector is booming, alongside voluntary action

LESTER M. SALAMON

DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR CIVIL SOCIETY STUDIES AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, UNITED STATES

The new spectre which is haunting the developed world is not that of the proletariat, which Karl Marx called to our attention some 150 years ago. Rather, it is the lonely bowler, as described by Robert D. Putnam in his book *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*—the alienated individual cut off from his or her social roots, lacking bonds of trust and reciprocity, and forced to function in a universe of all against all without those "habits of the heart," as Alexis de Tocqueville called them, which make human existence tolerable.

Accusing the welfare state

This situation has been traced in some accounts to the rise of the state and the more formal parts of the voluntary sector, which have supposedly crowded out informal voluntary activity and left it without a clear social function. A struggle is said to be raging between two epic foes: on one side the organized structures of social existence, chiefly the state and formal social organizations; and on the other the self-organization of individuals, with the former emerging victorious in the world's more developed regions, while true citizen self-organization holds its own, mainly in less developed regions.

In reality, we seem to be in the midst of a "global associational revolution"—a massive upsurge of organized private voluntary activity, of structured citizen action outside the boundaries of the market and the state. It may well prove to be as momentous a feature of the late 20th century as the rise of the nation-state was in the late 19th century.

Why is it happening now? The answer lies in four crises and two revolutions.

The first of these impulses is the perceived crisis of the modern welfare state, the growing sense that in Western Europe and North America, it has become overloaded, and expectations have outrun the capacity of state-delivered welfare to deliver. Far from simply protecting individuals against unreasonable risk, the welfare state stands accused of stifling initiative, absolving people of personal responsibility and encouraging dependence.

A crisis of development has arisen alongside this. The oil shocks of the 1970s and the recession of the early 1980s dramatically changed the outlook for developing countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, Western Asia and parts of Latin America, average per capita incomes began to fall. One result has been a growing consensus about the limitations of the state as an agent of development, and a new-found interest in "assisted self-reliance" or "participatory development," an aid strategy that stresses the engagement of grassroots energies through NGOs.

A worsening global environmental crisis—fuelled partly by the continuing poverty of developing countries, and partly by the wasteful practices of the wealthy—has also stimulated citizens into taking action on their own.

Finally, the collapse of the socialist experiments in Central and Eastern Europe has deepened scepticism about the abilities of government to satisfy the full range of human needs. While the promise of socialism had long been suspect, the economic regression of the mid-1970s helped destroy what limited legitimacy the communist system had retained. This failure ushered in a search for new ways to satisfy unmet needs, leading not only to the formation of market-oriented

© Pablo Bartholomew/Liaison/Gamma, Paris

In Lucknow, India, embroiderers belonging to the Self

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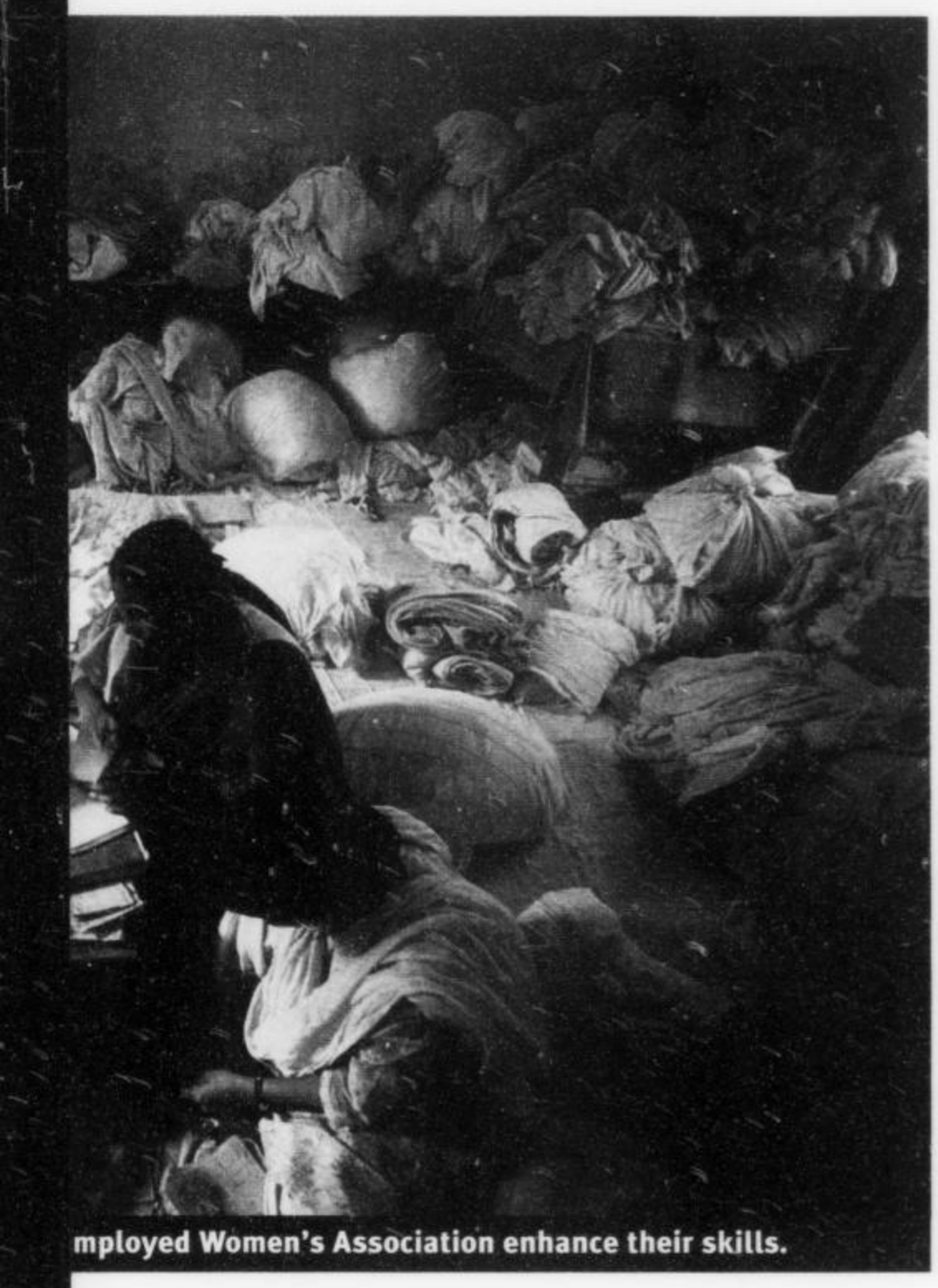
cooperative enterprises, but also experimentation with a host of NGOs.

Beyond these four crises, two further developments also explain the recent surge of third-sector organizations.

The first is the dramatic revolution in communications that took place during the 1970s and 1980s. The widespread dissemination of the computer, fibre-optic cable, fax, television and satellites opened the world's most remote areas to the communications links required for mass organization and concerted action. This development was accompanied by a significant increase in education and literacy. Between 1970 and 1985, adult literacy rates in the developing world rose from 43 to 60 percent.



mployed Women's Association enhance their skills.

Awakening the global bourgeoisie

The combined expansion of literacy and communications has made it far easier for people to organize and mobilize. Authoritarian regimes that had successfully controlled their own communications networks have grown powerless to stop the flow of information through satellite dishes and faxes. Isolated activists can more easily strengthen their resolve, exchange experiences, and maintain links with sympathetic colleagues at home or abroad.

Finally, the economic expansion of the 1960s and early 1970s produced a new global bourgeoisie which has helped promote third-sector growth. During this period the world economy grew five percent per year, with all regions sharing in the expansion—in fact the growth rate of the USSR, East European and developing countries exceeded that of industrial market economies. In Latin America, Asia and Africa, this growth helped create a sizeable urban middle class frustrated by the lack of real economic opportunity and often, real political participation. When economic conditions deteriorated after the 1970s oil shock, these new elites turned to NGOs in response, providing much of the leadership that has fuelled third-sector growth.

A wish-list for the non-profit sector

The result has been the emergence of an organized, private, non-profit sector that has quietly taken its place as a major economic, social and political force in nations around the world. Work done in 22 countries for the Johns Hopkins Comparative Non-profit Sector Project has revealed that non-profit organizations accounted for five percent of the workforce, not including the involvement of an estimated 11 million full-time unpaid volunteers. It also revealed that, as a general rule, the larger the non-profit sector, the more extensive the level of volunteering, underlining the fact that voluntarism is in some sense a social and not just an individual act.

What all of this suggests is the need for a new approach to address public problems. Two paradigms have dominated our thinking up to now. The first stresses sole reliance on the market, and the other sole reliance on the state. But the market model, though it has recently staged a remarkable recovery, essentially collapsed in the Great Depression of 1929. The public sector model fell with the Berlin Wall. The temptation will be strong among third sector activists to advance the "non-profit sector" as the panacea, and to urge complete reliance upon it.

Without denying the vital contribution that non-profit institutions can make, we should be wary of claiming more for the sector than it can deliver. We have learned over the past 100 years that today's problems are too complex for any one sector to handle.

What this suggests is that the appropriate paradigm for the 21st century is one of partnership and a politics of collaboration—i.e. a "new governance" that emphasizes collaboration, not separate action, by the different sectors as the best hope for achieving meaningful progress. This is the true meaning of the "civil society" about which we hear so much today—not a sector, but a relationship among sectors, and between them and citizens, in which all are actively engaged in addressing public problems.

Voluntarism has an important part to play in achieving such civic engagement. It can propel institutions into engaging in such collaborative efforts and can serve as the social grease to lubricate the resulting cooperation. Given the suspicions that often exist on all sides, this will not be an easy future to achieve or to manage. But it is the one that seems to me to offer the greatest prospects. ■

Children in chains

At the start of the new millennium, the trafficking and exploitation of children is one of the world's greatest scandals, enslaving around 100 million youngsters. Getting the upper hand on it means attacking the root causes of poverty and boosting law enforcement

© Marie Dorigny/Sipa Press, Paris

Symbols of exploitation: the hands of a young boy employed in a Colombian brick-making factory.

LOUISE CORRADINI

UNESCO COURIER JOURNALIST

In 1997, police in New York discovered a network of 55 deaf-mute children selling key-rings in the city's subway system. The Jackson Heights Deaf-Mutes, as the press called them, had been brought from Mexico by a gang specializing in selling defenceless children into slavery. At the end of an 18-hour day, they were expected to bring their bosses $100. Paid nothing, they were subjected to violent physical abuse.

This episode revealed that child slavery was indeed taking place in the heart of Western civilization. According to U.S. government estimates, between 700,000 and two million women and children are sucked into this illegal trade every year worldwide.

When the youngsters arrive in a foreign country, far away from their families, they are at the mercy of their employers. Isolated, they are put to work in plantations, factories, construction sites or domestic service. Or else they are forced to beg or become child prostitutes. Often confined in their workplaces, they toil in hazardous conditions. In short, they are treated as slaves.

The stories of Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Emile Zola and Edmundo d'Amicis about exploitation of children in the 19th century are comparable to what child slaves have to endure at the dawn of the new millennium.

The phenomenon cannot be separated from the much broader reality of child labour. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reckoned in 1995 that 73 million children under the age of 10 were "economically active" worldwide. On this ground, new forms of exploitation have developed. Due to the illegal nature of child slavery and trafficking, it is extremely difficult to collect data on its extent, but several recent studies give some idea of the sheer magnitude of the problem.

Staggering figures

• Every year, around 200,000 women and children are victims of the trade in Southeast Asia, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Trafficked children are being forced into sweatshops, brothels and begging on the streets.

• Between 100,000 and 150,000 Nepalese women and girls were sent in 1995 to India, where they were sexually exploited, reports the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association reports that more than 13,000 children were trafficked out of Bangladesh in the last five years.

• UNICEF estimates that there are 200,000 child slaves in West and Central Africa.

• In June 2000, Human Rights Watch denounced the practice of employing children in slave-like conditions on U.S. farms. About 50,000 women and children enter the United States each year to be used as slaves, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency admitted in April 2000.

• In Brazil, 40,000 children are sold every year to work on farms and as domestic servants. The traffickers lure girls with promises of jobs in restaurants in remote parts of the Amazon. Once there, they are forced to work in nightclubs and moved from one mining community to another.

• Girls from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are taken to Mexico and sold to brothels for $100 or $200 each, according to Casa Alianza, a human rights NGO that defends children in danger in the region (see page 40). In Nicaragua, an average of one child disappears every three days.

From Nepal to Nigeria or Brazil, the methods are the same. Traffickers

win the confidence of the parents with a small amount of money or clothes and the children are then entrusted to them. The recruiters promise to look after the children and find them a job that will help raise the standard of living of the whole family.

Trafficking in children arises from poverty, the decline of the extended family, lack of education for the children and of other sources of income for the family. But the illicit trade is also a result of how some societies regard children. The parents themselves are often reponsible for the enslavement of their offspring, seeing them as an investment and hoping they will be able to make some contribution to the family income, either in cash or in kind. This view creates fertile ground for child labour and trafficking to develop.

LEGAL INSTRUMENTS

Convention C182, known as "the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention," was adopted in 1999 by the ILO. This applies to "all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict."

The "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime" defines trafficking in persons as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include. . . the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."

Both documents define a child as a person under 18. ■

Offences that go unpunished

In strongly patriarchal societies, women and children have little or no freedom, which explains the extensive discrimination against girls, whose exploitation for sexual purposes or as domestic servants is seen to a certain extent as "normal."

The absence of national legislation aimed at punishing such trafficking makes things easier for the go-betweens and the employers. There is no agreed definition of the crime nor a common standard for penalties. In some countries charges can be pressed in court, but this is very rare. Inefficiencies in law enforcement, including lack of political will and corruption, perpetuate the problem.

The price of exploitation

In the Camerounian town of Bamenda, you can see notices in the street asking for child workers between six and 14. These are posted by clandestine middlemen who recruit the youngsters for cocoa or cotton plantations, where they will be paid just $14 a month.

In Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), employment agencies contract children to work in mines for $10 a month. They also find girls to send to Europe or the United States to work as maids for $25 a month, many of whom end up in child prostitution rackets.

With their miserable wages, these children are a pool of virtually free labour. The story is pretty much the same all over West and Central Africa. Trafficking in children for use as cheap labour in conditions of near-slavery has increased there in recent years, as an ILO investigation team found when it visited nine countries in the region.

The IPEC studies have traced trafficking routes and identified some countries as mainly suppliers (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali and Togo), while some (Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon) tend to be mainly receivers. Others (Benin and Nigeria) are both. Nigeria seems to be particularly affected by the phenomenon: 1,178 women and children are reported to have been trafficked between March 1999 and December 2000.

Most of the children are sold by their parents for between $14 and $40 each. Some of the agents say they manage to find work for as many as 150 children a year.

One Nigerian network makes between $10,000 and $12,000 for smuggling a child into New York, U.S. immigration officials say.

The system is the same in Asia and Latin America, two other continents described by international human rights organizations as "major suppliers" of child slaves. The total value of this worldwide trade in children is hard to estimate. But experts say it is one of the most profitable forms of organized transnational crime after drugs, illegal gambling and prostitution. ■

Lasting scars

The ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) is striving to find solutions to the problem. Based on past experience, IPEC has started several projects to help governments combat trafficking of children in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These aim to raise awareness of the issue and free children from exploitative work by tackling the root causes of poverty, ignorance, inadequate educational systems and law enforcement, as well as the lack of remunerative employment for adults.

The dreadful conditions which trafficked children work in and their contact with dangerous machinery and materials, as well as the harsh discipline meted out to them, do not simply harm their health. It also subjects them to severe psychological trauma. Separation from their families, the coercion involved in all trafficking, made worse by sexual abuse of child domestics, street children and prostitutes, makes them prone to depression. For many of these victims, this torment paves the way to a life of crime or drug addiction. ■

CHILDREN IN CHAINS

NGOs: gladiators of freedom

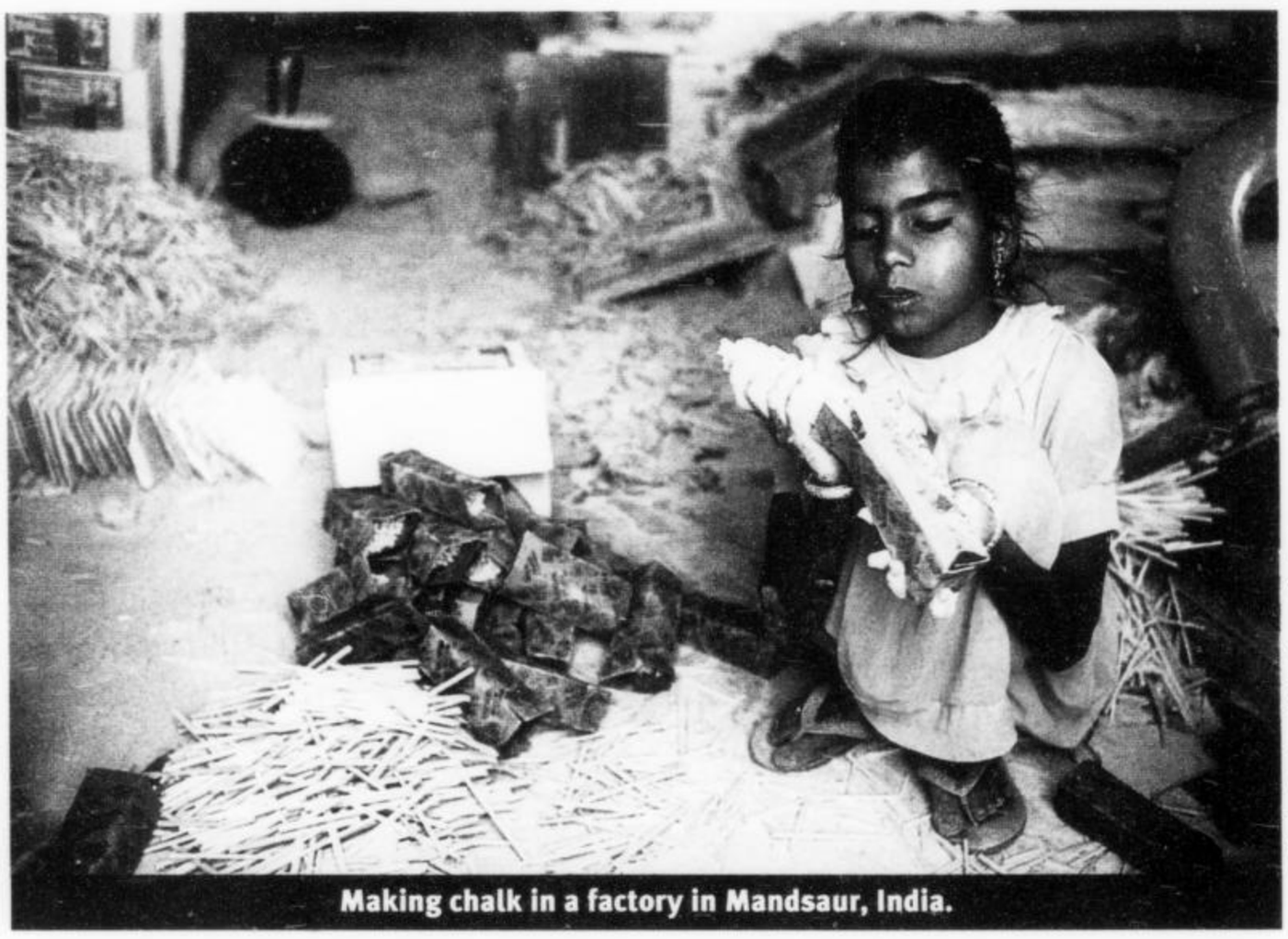
Working on the ground and in international campaigns, NGOs have managed to shed a glimmer of hope on the lives of hundreds of thousands of child slaves

L. CORRADINI AND ASBEL LÓPEZ

UNESCO COURIER JOURNALISTS

At five in the morning, well before most children get up to go to school, 12-year-old Abula sets out on a six-kilometre barefoot trek along a road made of mud and stone to work on a coffee plantation in Bouafle, Côte d'Ivoire.

When he gets there, wet and tired, the foreman tells him where he is to plant that day. "You have to work fast because they threaten to punish and starve us if we don't do the set amount of work," he says. "If we can't work because we're ill, we risk being physically tortured. One day I saw them torture two friends of mine who wanted to escape. Both of them ended up dead."



© Marie Dorigny/Sipa Press, Paris

Making chalk in a factory in Mandsaur, India.

Abula was rescued by Anti-Slavery International, which was founded in London in 1839 and proclaims itself the world's oldest NGO.

Along with other international organizations, such as the ILO, UNICEF and the European Union, NGOs have grown much more effective in their fight against child slavery and gone beyond simply trying to make governments and international bodies aware of its most extreme expression. Their most valuable work lies in rescuing and rehabilitating dozens of children suffering the cruellest forms of exploitation.

These NGOs work though close coordination between North and South. Those in the South gather evidence and testimonies, while those in the North publicize the issue and help organize international campaigns, the most striking of which was the Global March Against Child Labour in 1998, when groups set out from Asia, Latin America and Africa to assemble outside the ILO's headquarters in Geneva and denounce all exploitation of the world's children.

Anti-Slavery International is now pressing governments and political leaders to make the fight against child workers part of their political programmes. It maintains permanent contact with NGOs in the South and funds projects there to investigate the situation of child workers.

One such NGO is the Bangkok-based Child Workers in Asia (CWA), which recently highlighted the case of a child who was being atrociously exploited. Like Abula in Africa, 14-year-old Devi Lina Sari also rose before dawn to go to her job on a sugar plantation in Medan, Indonesia. "I set out at 6 a.m. every day except Sunday," she says. "I start work at seven and finish at four in the afternoon, with an hour's break at midday."

Like all children of her age, she'd like to play with her friends, but after cutting sugar-cane for eight hours she is too exhausted to do anything but rest. "If I cut myself with the machete, the boss pays for medicine but I have to reimburse him. If I'm ill and can't work, I don't get paid."

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The worst kind of child exploitation is sexual. Maria, a 12-year-old Honduran girl, was kidnapped in her country, sold in Guatemala and taken from there to Mexico, where she was bought by the owner of a bar who forced her to become a prostitute, servicing 20 men a day.

This tragic case was discovered by Casa Alianza, founded in Guatemala in 1981 and now the Latin American branch of Covenant House, a New York-based NGO. Casa Alianza started out by rehabilitating street children in Central America, but for the past four years it has focused on exposing the sexual and commercial trafficking and exploitation of children, which includes pornography, sexual tourism and child prostitution.

This is a massive task, but it has already proved effective: Costa Rica's special judge dealing with sex crimes acknowledges that two-thirds of the cases coming before him have been raised by Casa Alianza. ■

A local train named desire

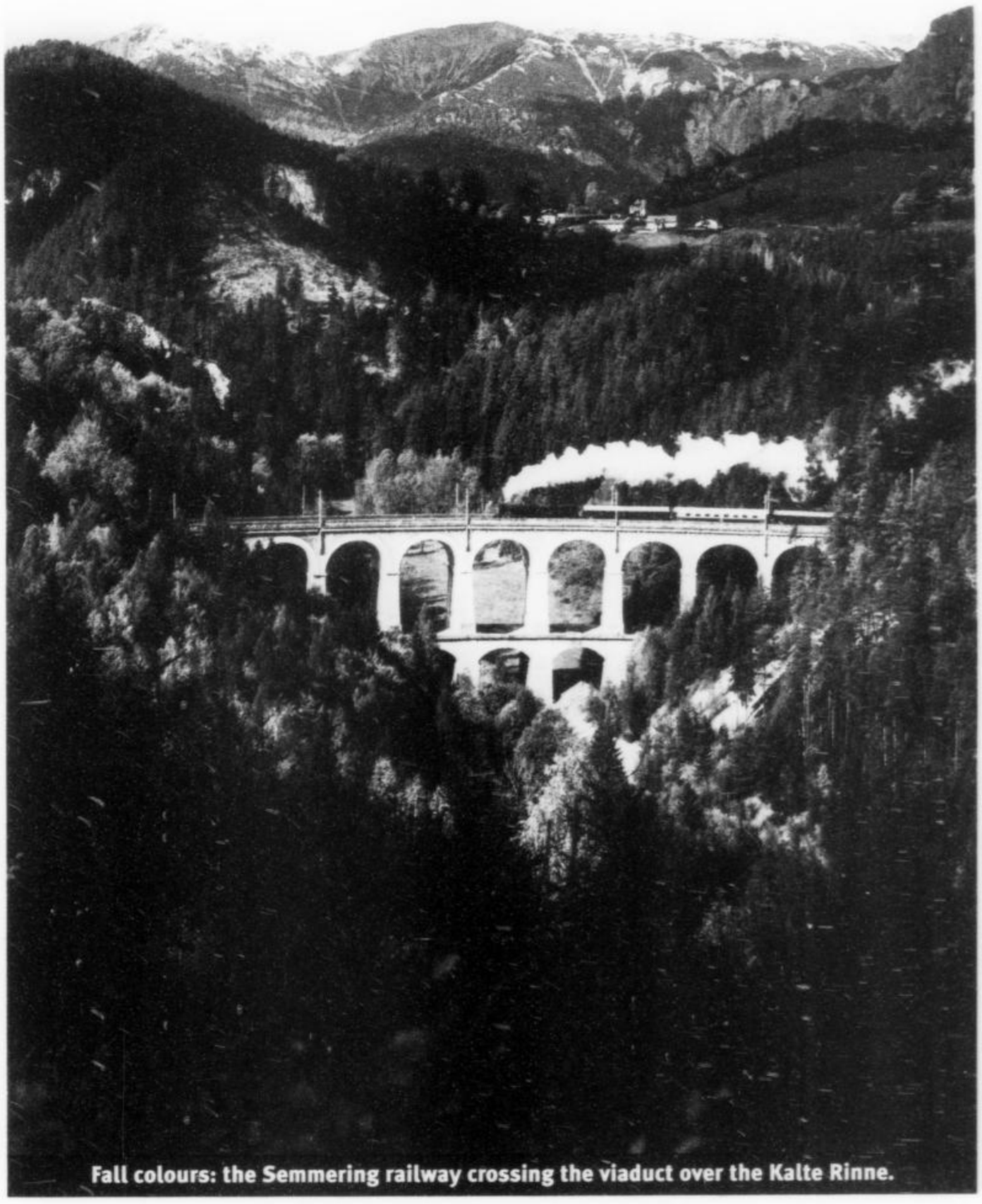
The railroad that chugs across Austria's Semmering pass is on the UNESCO World Heritage list. More than a technological achievement, this local train evokes memories of a vanished, melancholy world

SYLVIA TREUDL

WRITER, PUBLISHER AND POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCHER IN VIENNA (AUSTRIA)

It's not a good idea to visit the Semmering pass if you're sad, unless you're feeling really blue. And if you do make the journey, take the old *Semmeringbahn* railroad, which will offer much more than a winding trip through the mountains: a list of sentimental or legendary names will send chills up and down your spine. Höllental (Hell Valley), Bärensattel (Bear Saddle), Eselstein (Donkey Rock), Adlitzgräben (Adlitz Graves), Kalte Rinne (Cold Furrow). I've always preferred to cross the Semmering on this local train rather than on the comfortable express.

Once, I looked at the scenery straddling my motorcycle. The Höllental valley was cold and wet, the curves on the way to the pass scattered with sandy furrows. But even back then, I was too melancholic to admire the beautiful, strangely anachronistic scenery. What, lurking in the verdant forests, makes you cry and puts joy back in your heart? Perhaps I always chose the wrong time of year for a trip to the Semmering. When the fog brushes up against the rocks with its shreds of unhappiness and slips into the green meadows, when the gardens shoot past the train's windows, dazzling with a thousand colours, there is just one thing I want to do: shine one last time and learn to die with beauty, before the dead season comes. This mountain and scenery fill me with such sadness! Old memories come flooding back. Not mine, but those that others have told me, which they in turn had heard somewhere. Even so, they stir something in me. And I always conjugate the Semmering in the past tense, like the beginning of a fairy tale: "Once upon a time..."



© Tourismus Region Nieder-Österreich Süd Alpin, Semmering

Fall colours: the Semmering railway crossing the viaduct over the Kalte Rinne.

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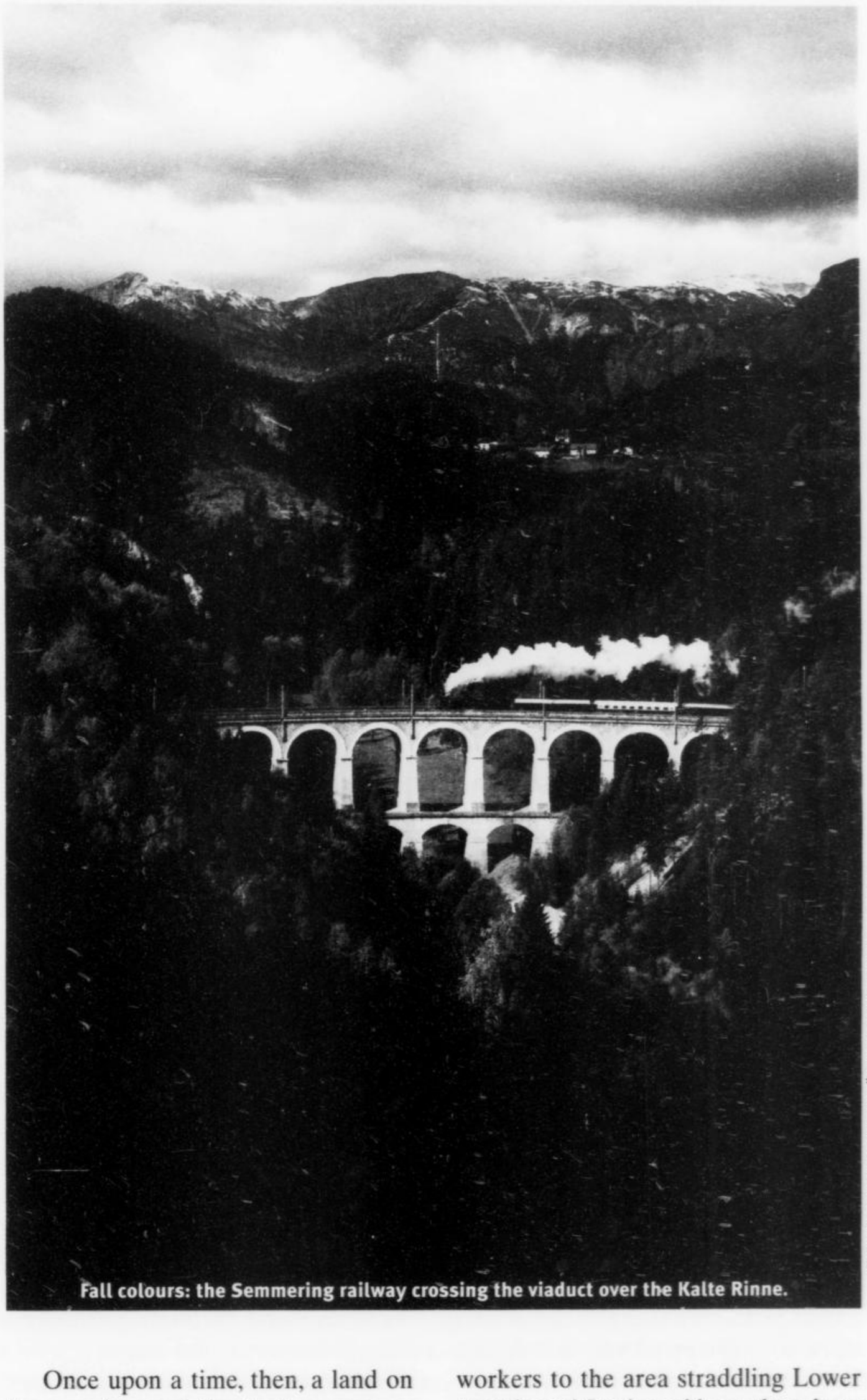

© Tourismus Region Nieder-Österreich Süd Alpin, Semmering

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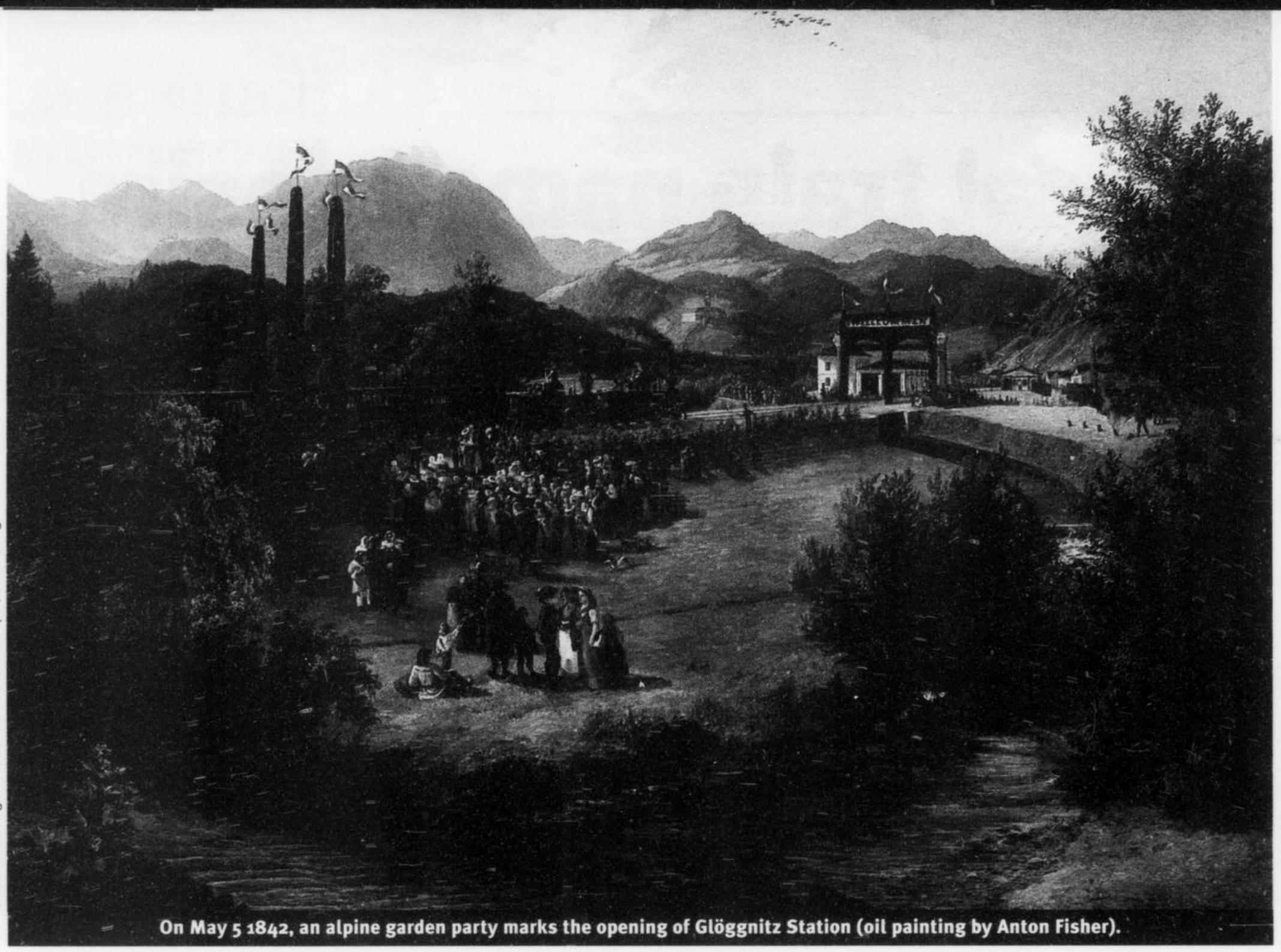


© Tourismus Region Nieder-Österreich Süd Alpin, Semmering

On May 5 1842, an alpine garden party marks the opening of Glöggnitz Station (oil painting by Anton Fisher).

credit for a spectacular, courageous undertaking—in Austria, at any rate: building a railroad that defied the mountains. Workers filled crevices in the rock, built viaducts over valleys and ravines. And the result was majestic. Today, the almost Gothic arches, which stand out against the sky and mountains in some places, seem as though they had been built merely to beautify the scenery, rather than to hold up the deafening roar of tons of steel which seemed to signal nature's capitulation to industry.

A certain Carlo Ghega, who was born in Venice and has gone down in architectural history and Austrian politics under the name of "Knight Karl von Ghega," shepherded this adventure to a successful conclusion. Tie after tie, rail after rail, he tamed the rebellious landscape in heroic solitude. At least according to the undying legend, which even inspired an Austrian bank note (it's out of circulation today). On the other hand, the labourers who wore themselves out hewing the rock walls with pickaxes and spades are seldom mentioned. That's how history is written.

The work was finished in 1854. At the time, Semmering station was the highest point on Earth reached by a railroad. The passengers were just as "elevated." Lavish villas and luxurious hotels that looked as though they might collapse beneath the weight of ornate Art Nouveau architectural ornamentation rose with the same arrogance as their counterparts on the Ringstraße, Vienna's most fashionable thoroughfare. They attracted the late nineteenth century's wealthiest people and most famous celebrities.

Silhouettes of a vanished world

Nobles, bankers, industrialists, painters, writers and philosophers felt an irresistible attraction to Semmering. Elegance, luxury and beauty, mingling with a good dose of decadence and narcissism, gradually overran the high mountain pastures. In the event of an emergency, Vienna was not far away, and the train trip was more enjoyable than travelling by horse and carriage. In summer, the area vied with the Mediterranean. In winter, it was the meeting place for a closed circle of regular visitors.

That world, which is as irretrievably lost as Atlantis, was strictly off-limits to people outside the closed circle of finance, politics or the interloping sphere of culture... Shh! Isn't that the writer Arthur Schnitzler's ghost behind the tall pine tree over there? Isn't he casually holding the manuscript of a melodrama in his pale hands? And down there, on that carpet of moss, isn't that Sigmund Freud, looking a bit under the weather, lost in his thoughts? A little further away in the undergrowth, is that a grazing deer or the poet Peter Altenberg walking forward with an energetic gait? Silhouettes of a vanished world.... Only the trees still remember these happy, sad or loving figures strolling beneath the dense canopy of foliage and needles. But for me, their presence haunts the woods, in the dark shadows of the rock walls.

I do not see any female silhouettes, as though women had never existed! Yet Wanda must have stayed near here. Or perhaps she did not have enough money to spend a summer in Semmering. She undoubtedly would have felt comfortable had she been able to afford a presentable dress. And who knows, maybe the course of her life would have changed if she could have left her unbearable husband, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, at home. But those are just assumptions and guesswork. And I'm surprised at feeling so down again.

Those ladies who accompanied those gentlemen to the Semmering took the waters there and enjoyed the change of scene. They came to chat and turn on their charm or, once their beauty wilted, while away the boredom. All of them

sank with their century without a trace. The only things left are faded captions on old photographs, like "ladies of the nobility at a charity ball in front of the champagne kiosk in Reichenau Park, probably on the 50th anniversary of the Semmering railroad, in 1904."

Why does this scenery keep me from living with my day and age? Why does it drive me into a state of melancholy, thrust me into a past that is so at odds with my desires, a kitschy, hopeless past occasionally resuscitated on the flickering screen of a revival movie house? The emperor hunting big game; the young empress disguised as Romy Schneider, unless it's the other way round; Austria depicted as a sewing kit, filled to the brim with aristocrats flanked by their suppliers! Only a handful of zealous laundrywomen, upright hunters and wary-looking poachers—against a backdrop of mountains and meadows—answer back.

A concrete jungle?

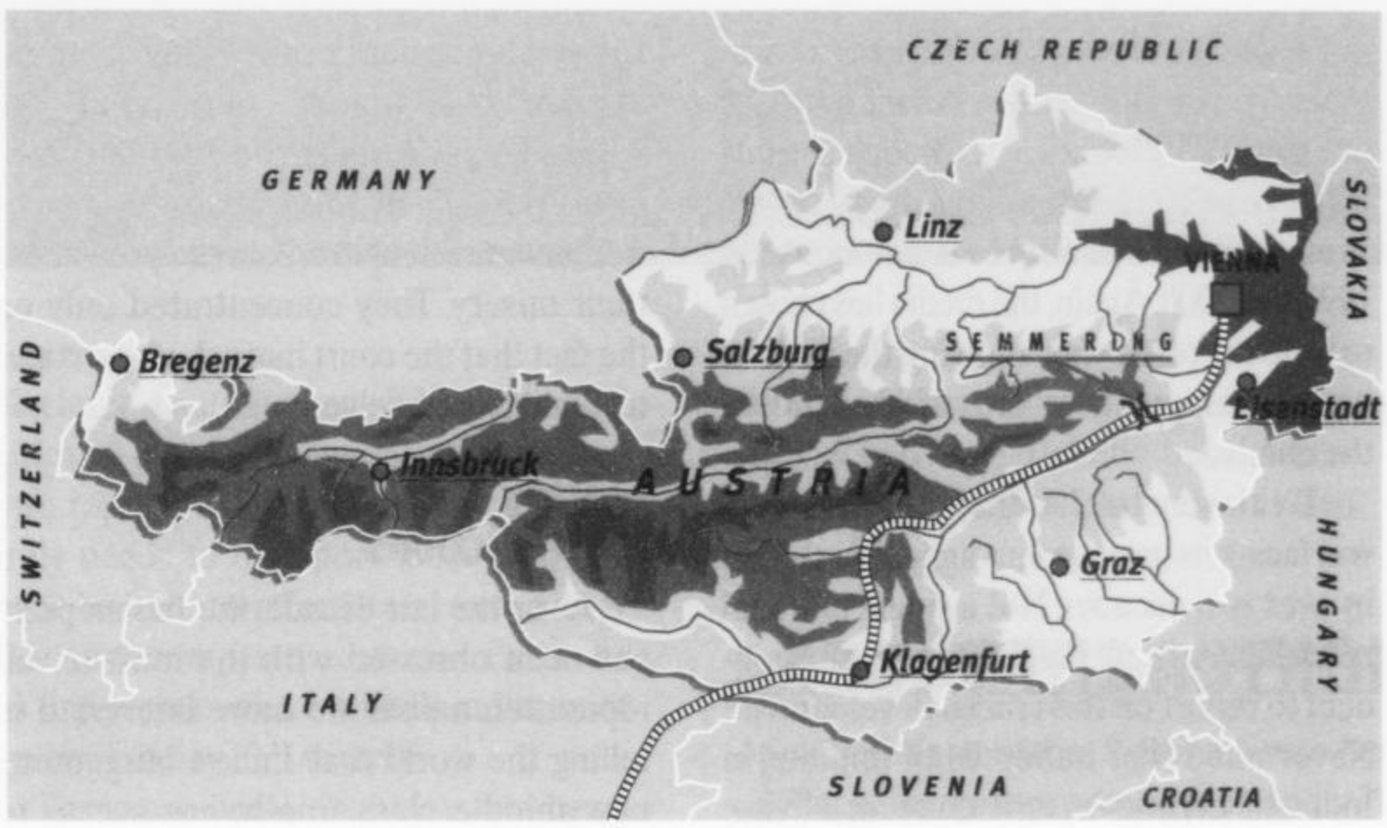
What awakens these old stories, which have so little to do with me? Is it the landscape or my passion for words? Or the dark melancholy that the Semmering makes me feel? I never see it in the full light of day, even when the sun is shining at its brightest. Though it is breathtakingly beautiful, this landscape tells me a tragic tale. No matter how much I think about the farmers, coal miners, metal-workers and small landowners who populate it, I cannot soften this gloomy impression. Mountain life is tough.

Let's turn away from the past and look towards the future. Hikers, mountain-climbers, tourists, sports enthusiasts and railroad buffs make up most of the Semmering's summer population. Being a railroad buff myself, I am closely following the debate over building a tunnel under the Semmering—a project that fills me with dread and mistrust. If the tunnel does go through (it depends on political choices), that will be end of my magnificent, melancholic journeys.

The tunnel would let anonymous express trains zoom through the belly of the mountain, saving the 20 minutes that I so thoroughly enjoy losing in the switchbacks. The 21st century citizen that I am could congratulate herself on such efficiency and progress! But I don't. Instead I am outraged at seeing this wild yet at the same time civilized place usurped, bruised and turned into a concrete jungle. Isn't it the fear of witnessing the disappearance of these unfathomable dreams that come over me without rhyme or reason during each of my journeys in the Semmering? They wander like stray cats, wending their way through the landscape, hiding, fearful, free and untamable like nightmares.

I admire this area, but I wouldn't want to live with it.

Only visit the Semmering if you are prepared to feel sad. Unless you are really happy. ■



IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH THE LANDSCAPE

The railroad line in Semmering, Austria, which has been on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1998, belongs to the "cultural landscapes" that first made their appearance on the list in 1994. A leg on the route from Vienna to Trieste, the line cuts through 41 kilometres of rugged mountain scenery between Glöggnitz and Mürzzuschlag and resulted in the world's first completely artificial tourist resort.

The 57 brick-and-stone guardhouses every 700 metres along the tracks, and the lavish villas and luxury hotels lining the route, are outstanding examples of the harmonious integration of architecture into a natural setting. The train crosses the daunting Semmering Pass at an altitude of 895 metres, travels through 14 tunnels (with a total length of 1,477 metres), over 16 viaducts (with a total length of 1,607 metres), four of which have two stories, and under more than 100 vaults. The railroad marked the start of the Alps' career as a tourist destination.

The route was divided into 14 sections, each given to a different company. In June 1848, 1,007 male and 414 female labourers started hewing away at the mountains with pickaxes. It took six years and up to 20,000 people to finish the job. On July 17, 1854, this engineering masterpiece was complete, and the first passengers were able to board.

The rugged terrain, lack of powerful explosives and technical limitations of the time made the task especially painstaking. Project manager Carlo Ghega not only had to do a complete survey of the area for lack of reliable maps, but to develop new surveying instruments as well.

The Semmering railroad was rebuilt many times over the years, especially as the weight and speed of trains have increased. Its appearance changed the most between 1957 and 1959, when the line was electrified. These necessary adjustments, however, have not altered the almost unique harmony between nature and architecture. ■

None so blind as those who will not see

Why don't stories on starvation and clean drinking water make it onto the front page of South Asian newspapers? An Indian journalist rails against the growing rift in his country between mass media and mass reality, a trend driven by increasing corporate control

P. SAINATH

INDIAN JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR

It took the Supreme Court of the land to put hunger back on the front pages of the Indian press in early May this year. Which is surprising. Who'd have thought any publication needs to be told that hunger is still a story in this country and the rest of South Asia?

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have all declared food surpluses in the past two or three years. Between them, the neighbours have a surplus of 50 million tonnes of food—but they are home to half the world's hungry. Unemployment and hunger have increased in the same decade that registered the surpluses.

Yet few in the media thought the paradox worth pursuing. India, with 45 millions tonnes of unsold excess stock of grain, was bursting with stories waiting to be told. Most of them are still waiting. From the mid-1990s, evidence of farmers committing suicide in large numbers began to pour in from several states, particularly Andhra Pradesh in the south. In 1996-97, for example, over 400 farmers in a handful of districts in Andhra Pradesh killed themselves, mainly because they were too burdened by debt and unable to feed their families. A few stray reports acknowledged this, but no national newspaper actually put it on the front page. Recent government figures show that in Anantapur, just one district of Andhra, 1,826 people, mainly farmers with very small holdings of two acres or less, committed suicide between 1997 and 2000. Again, the media has chosen to look the other way, allowing the authorities to manipulate records of what caused the deaths.

By the end of 2000, it was clear India was facing its most serious agricultural crisis in over two decades. Not a single national newspaper assigned a full-time correspondent to report on this crucial development. Never mind that hundreds of millions in India still depend on agriculture for a living.

© P. Sainath

Picking the leaves that make *beedis* for a pittance: does anyone care?

Finally, the Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) of Rajasthan state resorted to a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India on the issue of hunger, drawing attention to the paradox of bursting granaries and empty stomachs. In early May, the Court served notices to six state governments, directing them to explain why things were going so wrong. That, finally, made it to the front pages. But nobody wrote about the crisis, or went into the field to talk to the poor about their misery. They concentrated only on the fact that the court had asked the states to explain themselves.

Glaring contradictions

Over the last decade, the Indian press has been obsessed with the most trivial topics. Journalists are more interested in telling the world that India's burgeoning new middle class finally has access to McDonald's burgers and the latest international designer labels. Or writing about the proliferation of weight-loss clinics and beauty contests. These are the topics that generate advertising revenue, not unpleasant stories about starvation deaths and the lack of clean drinking water, even in the heart of large cities. India's contradictions are well-reflected in the press. On the one hand, you have overweight urbanites paying thousands of rupees to shed weight at clinics, while on the other, thousands starve to death. The media got the first story. They missed the second.

Examples of the short-sightedness that afflicts much of South Asian journalism abound. Dozens of cover stories appeared on the automobile revolution, as India liberalized the automobile industry in 1991. More and more rich people bought cars to add to those they already owned. In 1998, there were still just five million registered

In the state of Orissa, two men carry their severely injured brother on a bamboo bed to the nearest hospital, 40 kms away.

© P. Sainath

vehicles in a nation of one billion. The real stories, on growing pollution and the lack of mass rapid transit systems which India direly needs to transport those who will never be able to afford cars, were rarely told. And there were no stories about the fact that bicycle sales, a reliable indicator of rural well-being, fell sharply.

There are occasional bleeding-heart stories on the sorrows of the poor, but the newspapers fail to make the connection between poverty and the policies driving it—what I call "market fundamentalism" and its attendant structural adjustment programmes.

Why is there such a lack of interest in crucial issues like poverty? What accounts for the disconnection between mass media and mass reality, and why do the largest sections of the Indian press fail to cover the most important stories?

The grip of press barons

The 1990s have witnessed the decline of the press as a public forum. This can be attributed largely to the relentless corporate takeover of the Indian press and the concentration of ownership in a few hands. Around seven major companies account for the bulk of circulation in the powerful English language press. In the giant city of Bombay, with over 14 million people, *The Times of India* has a stranglehold on the English readership. It also dominates the Hindi and Marathi language press.

The Times is clear and unequivocal in its ▶

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Journalist and author P. Sainath won Amnesty International's first-ever Global Human Rights Journalism prize in June 2000. This follows a dozen other prestigious awards, including the European Commission's Lorenzo Natali Journalism Award in 1994.

Sainath received international recognition after he spent two and a half years bicycling through India's poorest districts, filing reports about a class of people the press seldom deigns to write about. That work formed the basis of his landmark book, *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* (Penguin Books, 1996), a devastating portrait of how the Indian government's development policies have gone awry.

The book, which has been translated into three Indian languages as well as Swedish and Finnish, is now in its eighth printing. It remained the number one non-fiction bestseller by an Indian author for over two years.

Covering India's ten poorest districts, Sainath traversed close to a 100,000 kilometres—including 5,000 on foot—lugging a heavy typewriter (there was never enough electricity around to recharge a laptop battery).

Despite their extremely critical content, several stories from his journey have been used as case studies for trainees in India's elite administrative service, the IAS. Other project landmarks include an oral archive of taped interviews with people from the bottom one percent of society talking about themselves and a unique visual archive of thousands of photographs of the Indian poor at work.

Sainath is currently writing a series of reports on the Dalits, formerly called untouchables, who remain India's most marginalized and discriminated-against people.

When not on the road, Sainath teaches at Bombay's Sophia Polytechnic. He has been a visiting professor at universities in Australia, Canada and the U.S. ■

Press in the world's largest democracy

Despite its shortcomings, the Indian press reflects the country's immense diversity, counting some 43,828 publications, including 4,890 dailies. Newspapers are published in 18 principal languages and over 81 small languages and dialects. Hindi, the national language, accounts for the largest number of papers.

The total circulation of the Indian press reached nearly 127 million in 1998 (most recent figure available). Daily newspapers had a circulation of three million in 2000, while non-dailies accounted for just under eight million copies.

***The Times of India* is by far the largest circulated daily newspaper in the country, with its six editions attracting a daily circulation of more than 1.3 million copies. *The Malayala Manorama*, published with eight editions in Malayalam, the language of Kerala state, has a total combined circulation of 1.12 million copies. *The Gujarat Samachar*, with five editions published in Gujarati, comes in third position with 859,015 copies.**

All these newspapers are privately owned by publishing houses that produce several publications in different languages. Despite these six-digit figures, only 12.68 percent of India's one billion people have access to a printed publication. ■

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India and World Association of Newspapers, Paris.

priorities. Beauty contests make the front page. Farmers' suicides don't. Sometimes reality forces changes, but this is the exception, not the rule. Most other large Indian newspapers are eagerly following *The Times*' philosophy, inspired by the press baron Rupert Murdoch: a newspaper is a business like any other, not a public forum. Monopoly ownership has imposed a set of values entirely at odds with the traditional role of the Indian press.

An illustrious record

Historically, the press in India has been very strong at covering the issues it today tends to ignore. Indian journalism was a child of the nation's freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and a host of other freedom fighters doubled up as journalists and publishers, bringing out their own newspapers. These and many others plied a radical journalism that constantly put the British Raj on the defensive. The journalists of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s may have been very ill-equipped, and some would call them pamphleteers. Yet, from within a very narrow press, they reflected much wider concerns than journalists do today.

Now, with rare exceptions, the greatest Indian papers are run increasingly on corporate lines. Profits and advertising do not rhyme with socially-relevant news. This is reflected in the "beats" (or portfolios) of journalists within newspapers. The Indian press covers far more than the basic politics, sports and commerce stories it concentrated on a decade ago. We now have full-time correspondents for fashion, glamour, design, even eating out! One non-financial daily has 11 correspondents covering business in a society where less than two percent of the population have investments of any kind. Beats related to covering the lives of ordinary people, however, are vanishing at a rapid rate. Correspondents covering education are often loaded with several other unrelated beats because education is not considered a weighty enough topic. And no paper has a full-time poverty, unemployment, or housing correspondent.

Not surprisingly, the media has proved increasingly inept at covering development issues. The more elitist it gets, the less it will be able to achieve this. The equation is simple: the more corporate a newspaper becomes in its ownership and culture, the less space there is for public interest in it.

This is explained cogently in Ben Bagdikian's book, *The Media Monopoly*, which shows the incredible power of media conglomerates across the globe. A handful of them, like Rupert Murdoch's Newscorp and AOL-Time Warner decide much of what most nations see, hear or read.

When the media is driven by no higher cause than maximization of profit, it can seldom serve the public interest. When corralled by corporate interest, journalism gets devastated. And in the world order of market fundamentalism, the suggestion that anything could be fundamentally wrong with neo-liberal economics, with globalization or privatization, is heresy. If Gandhi were alive today, he would be quickly denounced as a dangerous left-wing loony.

The 1990s have witnessed a rapid growth of inequality the world over, as successive UN *Human Development Reports* have shown us. This may occasionally be reported in the press. But questioning the social and economic philosophies and frameworks that generate this inequality is just not done.

Signalling society's weakness

Yet, even allowing for the limits imposed by corporatization, the Indian press can do much more.

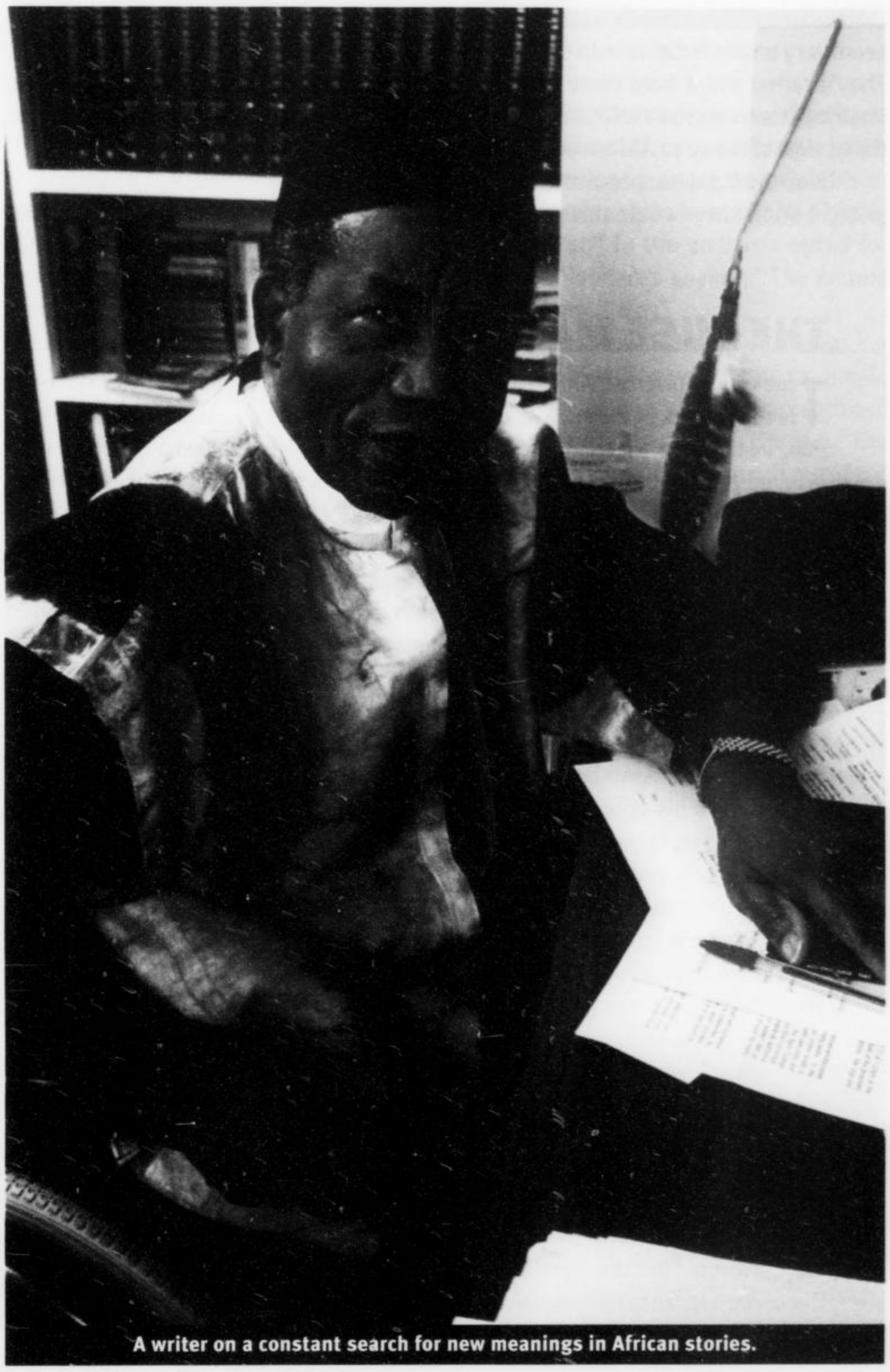
Journalists must place people and their needs at the centre of stories, and accord better coverage to the rural political process. They should discuss political action and class conflict, not the politicking. Quite a few good journalists hold back from this territory, fearing, perhaps justifiably, being branded as "political" (read leftist). Yet, evading reality (the largest number of absolute poor live in India) helps no one. A society that does not know itself cannot cope.

More stories on the rights and entitlements of the poor could help. The press can and does make a difference when it functions. Governments do react and respond to the press, if the press tries hard enough to be heard. Take the example of the stories on starvation deaths in Kalahandi, Bihar, in the 1980s, which forced two prime ministers to visit the place.

Decades ago, commenting on the dismal role of the American press in a miscarriage of justice, an attorney in the United States said they failed "to signal the weakness in society." That remains a fine definition of the minimum duty of a decent press: to signal the weaknesses in society. It is a duty the Indian press increasingly fails to perform, but must try to. At least there are some journalists who believe they should, and they must push harder to signal these weaknesses. Only then can we hope for meaningful development. ■

Chinua Achebe: no longer at ease in exile

Although confined to a wheelchair far from his native Nigeria, the founding father of African literature in English is as close to his beloved home as in student days, when revolt awoke the writer within



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A writer on a constant search for new meanings in African stories.

In your last book, you recall listening as a child to the conversations of your relatives and family friends who met at the piazza of your father's house. You only began to understand the significance of their discussions decades later. Today, at the age of 70, are there any ideas from those early times that continue to rattle around in your head?

Yes—the recognition of the importance of stories. We don't know one-tenth of the stories knocking about. But if you want to understand a people's experience, life and society, you must turn to their stories. I am constantly looking for that moment when an old story suddenly reveals a new meaning.

It's a bitter loss not to meet the kind of people that I encountered in my father's house. They were not giants—in fact they were quite unimpressive in terms of what they achieved, but when they are gone, you realize that they were more important than you originally thought.

At the age of 25, you began writing your first story, *Things Fall Apart*, which is considered one of the first African classics to be published in English (1958). Legend has it that the book was the result of what you describe as a "landmark rebellion," when your fellow students openly challenged the latent racism in *Mister Johnson*, written by a British author and revered by colonial teachers. At the time, did you have any idea where this rebellion would lead?

Mister Johnson did not turn me into a writer—I was born that way. But it did open my eyes to the fact that my home ▶

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was under attack and that my home was not merely a house or a town, but an awakening story in which the first fragments of my own existence began to have coherence and meaning.

To begin with, it just seemed to me that everyone was entitled to tell his or her own story. Some of the first people to embrace this notion were friends and classmates who more or less said, "Well if Chinua can do it, so can I." Then came the ladies. Even the British writers who had previously tried to represent us began to step back and leave the telling to the owners of the story.

This recognition hasn't stopped growing. It's gone to the point where the seventh edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* includes *Things Fall Apart* as a major contribution of the 20th century.

Artists are now pushing to not only tell their own story but to do so in their own language. You must understand their frustration. *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into about 50 languages but not your native Igbo.

Of course it bothers me. However, I feel very strongly that a novel written about the Igbo people in English is better than no novel at all. You can never wait for the ideal circumstances to take action. You do what you can right away—not in 50 years or 15—because you cannot be certain where the current situation will lead.

For instance, a few months ago I went home for the first time in 10 years. The real purpose of the journey was to give a public lecture in Igbo about the problem of the language (the continued use of a standard dialect imposed by colonial missionaries). It was one of the most incredible things I have ever done in my life. Thousands and thousands of people in an open stadium were dramatically responding to my words. So the question of Igbo language is very close to my heart and I'm working on it all the time. *Things Fall Apart* tells the world about the Igbo people. Now let us figure out how to tell our children and ourselves in our own language the same story and even more. It's not a matter of choosing this language or the other, but about accommodating both possibilities.

"Westerners see a moral message in art as a weakness"

Your stories revolve around the weaknesses of your central characters. As you've written, "it's not very exciting when monstrous characters cause trouble. When an ordinary man causes havoc, that is more ominous." But Western critics often seem very uncomfortable with this irony. They'd rather see a hero come through. Their criticism seems to reflect an essentialist view of the good African or the bad.

I think the word essentialism is appropriate. I don't know where this defective way of looking at art comes from. I suspect it's more Western than African because in my case—that of the Igbo—art is inclusive. It includes ordinary people and their lives.

We have, for instance, this Mbari celebration in which ordinary people are secluded for a few months to work with professional artists. Everyone and everything is included in the creative process. Whatever appears on the horizon—be it a new religion or a missionary's bicycle—is part of this story. This is a way of domesticating what is new or foreign. By bringing a new element into your home, you bring it under surveillance. It's both about hospitality and practicality to ensure your own safety.

The goddess—called Ani by the Igbo—who commands the Mbari festival is not

THE WISE MAN IN THE WOODS

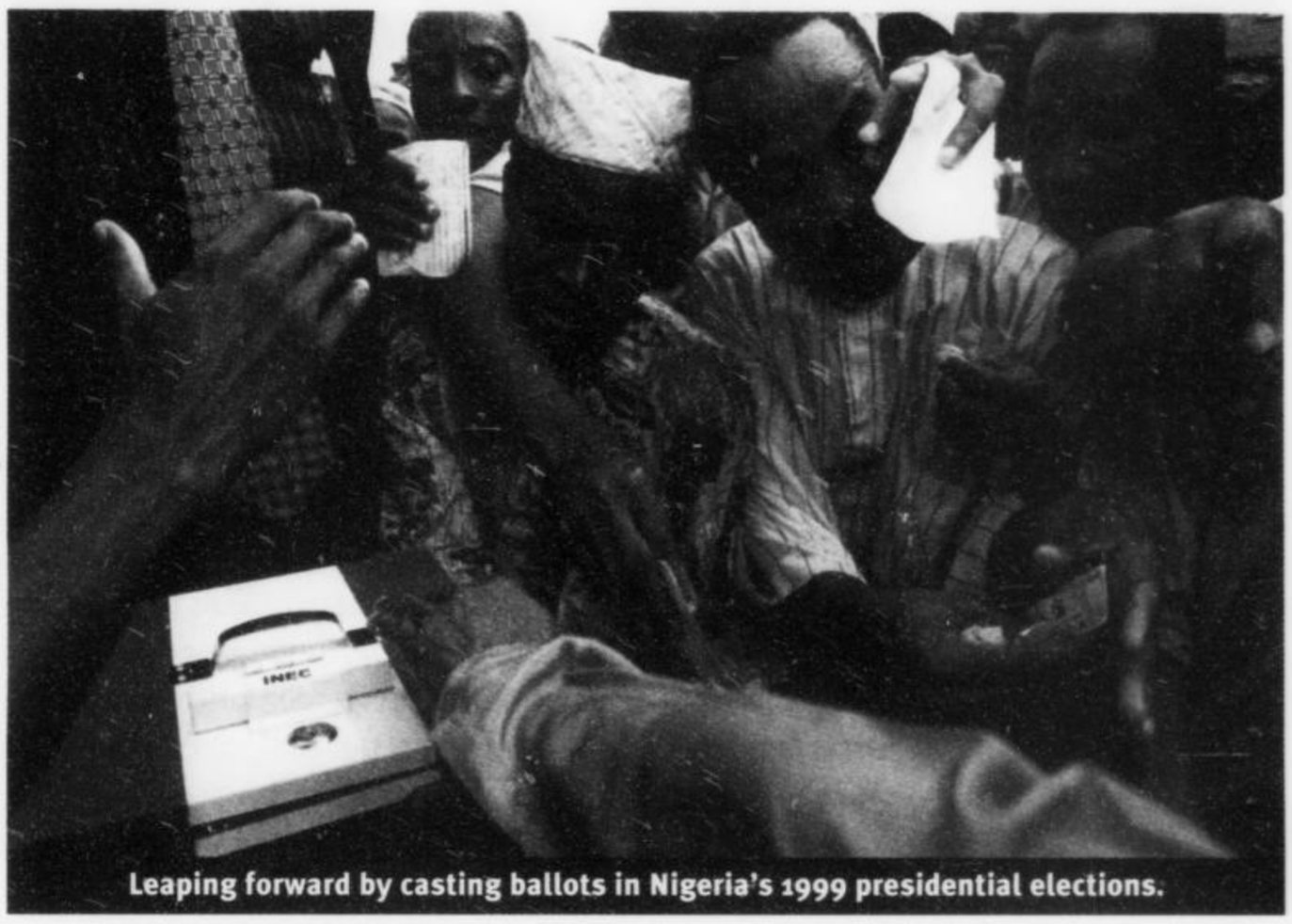
True art is universal. An old and sometimes pretentious idea until you meet—or read the work of—Chinua Achebe. No grand theories to build a universal civilization, instead the Nigerian offers stories steeped in Igbo philosophy, which have inspired the most diverse readers. The same books that helped to sustain Nelson Mandela during his prison years are studied as classics by students around the globe. Considered the founding father of the African novel, Achebe has attracted more scholarly papers and media articles than any other African author. His work—including some 20 books, numerous essays and edited collections of African short stories—has been translated into 50 languages.

The first novelist to offer an African perspective on colonialism, Achebe has turned the same critical eye to contemporary ills such as the rampant corruption of Nigeria's rulers. In his most recent book, *Home and Exile* (Oxford, 2000), Achebe analyzes the current state of post-colonial literature based on his personal experience. In particular, he celebrates his good fortune in being part of a "crossroads generation." Born in Nigeria in 1930, he recalls village elders infusing his childhood with traditional Igbo culture, while a modern education and the heady days of Nigeria's independence provided the distance to both respect and criticize his society without passing judgement.

Today Achebe is faced with a painful story: a car accident in 1990 forced him into a wheelchair. Unable to receive the medical care he needs in Nigeria, he lives with his wife in a modest house in the woods north of New York City at Bard College—a small elite liberal arts college, where both Achebes teach.

"During happier days," says Achebe, "I always suspected that the virtue of difficulty is enriching. But I didn't have any real personal experience to base this on until my accident. I remember being in the hospital and a well-meaning visitor asked, 'Why you?' And I said, 'Why not?' (A deep laugh) 'Who *should* it be?'"

Under the soft wisdom lies a bitter irony: the man who has beseeched African artists to stay at home is exiled from the place closest to his heart and where he is needed most, Nigeria. "But the inner life is a major source and doesn't entirely depend on where you happen to be. You make use of what life deals," says Achebe, "which is what a lot of our stories are about." ■



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Leaping forward by casting ballots in Nigeria's 1999 presidential elections.

only responsible for art and creativity but morality as well. So there is always a frontier between good and evil. This is why art cannot be used to justify destruction or an essentialist view of people. That doesn't mean that our heroes are angels—they are human like anyone else.

However, Westerners see a moral message in art as a weakness. In the West, a novel that is said to be "political" is not very good. Or critics say, "despite its political message, it is good," which is in itself a very political thing to say. For it means, "the world is okay; we don't need to drag any extraneous or political issues into the story."

In searching for a metaphor to reflect post-colonial literature, you first considered: "Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter." In the end, you opted for Salman Rushdie's saying: "The empire writes back." Why?

The metaphor of the lion was far too dramatic. The lion was bound to drag in willy-nilly the question of its strength and overpowering the enemy. But the "The empire writes back" reminded me of the first post office in my village. As a child, I watched the building go up and followed the transactions going on there. As I learned to put pen to paper, I watched postmasters on bicycles bringing sacks of letters and taking others away. Then came the blue-painted lorry emblazoned with "Royal Mail". As children, we called it Ogbuaekwu-ugwo, which means Killer-that-doesn't-pay-back. We saw the various forms in which we were being integrated into the empire.... "Writing back" is not violent like the lion. It celebrates debate and persuasion.

You have been revolting since your early days against a long line of colonial literature which was originally used to justify the slave trade. The current media trend of reporting only on the misery of Africa stems, in your eyes, from this same line of thinking. The latest chapter in this "story" is the call to "take a hard look at Africa" and insist that the continent's problems are strictly her own fault. Why this rise in "zealotry"?

I suspect it's the guilt of imperialism and slavery. Slavery is probably the one thing that the West is still most uncomfortable about. I suspect that the "discovery" of slavery in Africa today gives a good deal of good feeling to this group of zealots. Some people, perhaps not realizing what's going on, are playing into their trap. There is no denying the abuse of children that can go on in poverty—when parents, for example, send their children to work because they are unable to earn a bare minimum. But then some well-meaning Westerner stumbles upon this and cries "Slavery!" The downgrading ▶

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"The oldest man is the reference book of the village. This keeps the mind active"

of the word "slave" to represent any kind of abuse or ill-treatment doesn't help the story about what happened for 300 years in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

For every two steps forward, take one step backwards—that's the way you described the "experiment known as Nigeria" about 20 years ago in an interview. What phase is the country in now?

Nigeria took a huge step to get out of military dictatorship. However the military had been so powerful for so long that an ordinary civilian leader taking them on seemed to require too much luck to succeed.

So Olusegun Obasanjo [a retired general elected president in 1997] seemed to be the ideal person to navigate this problem. He was the only military ruler ever to hand power back to civilians, in 1987. And finally, he experienced the terrorism of the military dictator Sani Abacha and is lucky to be alive.

He has done fairly well. But the problem of getting Nigeria back to sanity, let alone prosperity, is far greater than anyone imagined. So there doesn't seem to be a chance for much dramatic achievement in this first term. But the fact that we are still knocking about and asking how we should proceed is a truly great measure of success.

The fear I have now comes from rumours that the next president could be Ibrahim Babangida, the military dictator preceding Abacha. If we were to get the notion that the retired generals from the terrible past will take their turn to rule—that would be a signal for the ultimate suicide.

A central question in your work has been about finding an appropriate form of political representation. Does the question still apply?

Finding the form is not difficult, at least on paper. But it is difficult when the economic poverty of the people is so great that we cannot trust them to exercise control over who rules them—a situation in which they would accept a few dollars from anybody in exchange for their vote. The level of poverty is crucial in measuring the success of any kind of representation. And the most ruthless and cynical leaders know this. So they plunder the state and stash the money to use whenever there is an election.

Western reports on Nigeria's transition to democracy almost always evoke the spectre of an ethnic explosion. How real is the threat?

The ethnic problem is real but an explosion is not inevitable. You have differences in language, culture and history. But it is important to realize that none of these ethnic groups were recently imported into Nigeria. They have all been there through the millennia. The level of contact among groups has increased, but nobody is an intruder. So if it was possible in the past for these people to live as near or distant neighbours, then there is no reason to expect an inevitable explosion today.

Whenever there is a problem, if you look closely you will find somebody manipulating differences between people to serve a purpose of their own. We saw it clearly at the beginning of our nationalist existence, when the British were planning their exit from Nigeria. They helped to set one group against another so that we would fight amongst ourselves instead of against them.

Our leaders inherited that ability to create dissension. You saw it at its worst during our civil war, the Biafran War. And we have it today with the imposition of sharia law in parts of the country. Our

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real problem is one of leadership at all levels.

You once asked in an interview: "How do we transmit a national culture to Nigerians if not through works of imagination?" Aren't you putting a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of the artist?

Yes it is heavy. But a little goes a long way. It surprised me for instance when in 1987 a leader of one of the main parties, which is based in the Muslim north, asked me to be his deputy. I joined simply to tell people that it was possible to go from eastern Nigeria to a party in the north that is led by a mullah, an honest man of integrity. That I was a writer rather than politician made the proposal doubly remarkable.

So the writer has a leadership role to play.

Yes, but you must also explain that nobody can have all the answers. By saying that our problem is one of leadership doesn't mean that the "followership" has no work.

Everybody wants to be a leader until you see the responsibilities it entails. You see this clearly in a society like mine, where age, for example, is revered. But not revered for nothing. The oldest man is the one who knows most about the past. He is the reference book of the village. That kind of responsibility keeps a man's mind active.

When will you go home to take on this role?

Aaah, I really want to go back home. But there are a number of serious limitations that have increased since I went into the wheelchair. I have to consider for instance such things: is there a hospital within reach? If I need certain antibiotics, will they be available?

What do you miss most?

The atmosphere of real work. The atmosphere of people who are on the same page with you. For instance, just before my accident, I became president of my town council. The other day, the current president wrote to me to ask for my help with a project for a new library. Nobody in upstate New York comes and says, "we want to build a library, can you help?" I miss being where I am needed most.

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A traditional meeting of masks, minds and spirits in South Ika, Nigeria.

INTERVIEW BY AMY OTCHET
UNESCO COURIER JOURNALIST

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Major titles:
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